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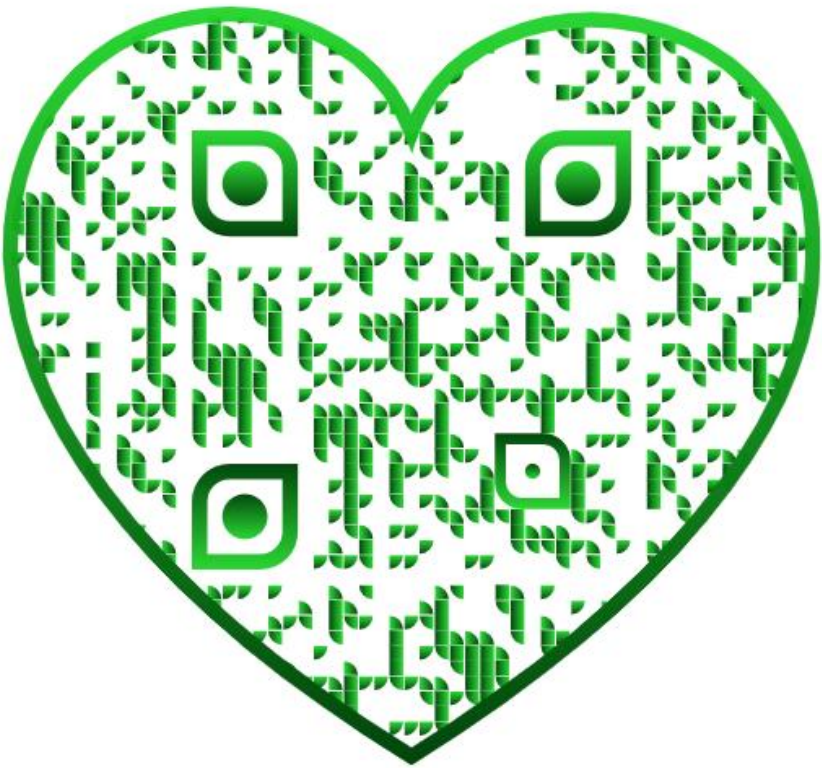
24 AKBAR ROAD

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE FALL AND RISE OF THE CONGRESS

With a new chapter on Rahul Gandhi

RASHEED KIDWAI



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Praise for *24 Akbar Road*

'The tag of Rasheed Kidwai's book…hides what is in fact an absorbing tale rather than a scholarly history, written as it is in a racy style… [A]n enjoyable read.' – *Outlook*

'The book gives you a broad understanding of how the Congress functions.' – *Businessworld*

'Here is the stuff of fiction, found in real men and women who matter – from manipulation and intrigue to assertions of power, from the hum drum details of life to the pinnacles of tragedy.' – *Telegraph*

'*24 Akbar Road* is a breezy account of the Congress in the years of Indira Gandhi and her successors.' – *Tehelka*

'It is a book that will be a talking point in Congress circles – and beyond – for a long time to come.' – *Hindustan Times*

'Using the Congress seat of power at 24 Akbar Road as his vantage, author Rasheed Kidwai draws a compelling account of the rule – both backseat and forefront – from Indira, Sanjay and Rajiv Gandhi to Narasimha Rao and Sitaram Kesri, to the present-day trinity of Sonia Gandhi, Manmohan Singh and Rahul Gandhi.' – *Financial Express*

'Rasheed Kidwai, over many years of journalistic reportage and a close study of its affairs, has put together an incisive and engaging account of the Congress's shape-shifting nature and its tenuous hold at the Centre, providing a dispassionate observer's glance at affairs within the Congress.' – *The Hindu*

'If political gossip turns you on, go for this book.' – *Times of India Crest Edition*

24
AKBAR-ROAD

24 Akbar Road

A Short History of the People behind the Fall and Rise of the Congress

Revised and Updated Edition

Rasheed Kidwai

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For Abbu – my father, Abdul Aleem Kidwai

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Foreword

Two years ago, when I wrote a foreword to the first edition of Rasheed Kidwai's fine book, *24 Akbar Road*, I had ended it by saying: 'Maybe, 24 Akbar Road is an appropriate address for the Congress. The greatest Mughal emperor was the flag-bearer of a dynasty that endured over time. The Congress is like the Mughal empire – its line of succession pre-ordained.' Two years later, I hate to triumphally suggest 'I told you so', but the ascent of Rahul Gandhi to the vice-presidency of the Congress is confirmation of the dynastical principle in the party of the freedom movement.

Rahul has yet to prove his political mettle. His one attempt at becoming the face of the Congress campaign in Uttar Pradesh in 2012 was a mini-disaster: the Congress finished a distant fourth. Stunned by the defeat, Rahul appeared to have withdrawn from the heat of battle. He has rejected repeated calls for him to take a ministerial berth or pitch himself as the party's candidate for the prime-ministership. But call it desperation, or good old-fashioned sycophancy, Congressmen appear determined to push Rahul's credentials for the top job. Even a reluctant prince it appears is a better option than anyone else who may have served the party for decades. Why has the party of the Mahatma become almost a family property? Is the Nehru–Gandhi family badge its sole calling card today? Is the Congress no longer a party of mass leaders but simply a cabal of manipulators?

Kidwai's book doesn't seek to provide all the answers. But the writer attempts to fill a gap in contemporary politics by documenting the behind-the-scenes machinations of a post-Jawaharlal Congress. This book is not an academic treatise, but is a racy, well-reported thriller, written by a journalist who has closely tracked the Congress for several years now.

Reporting on the Congress is not easy. The BJP has always been a media-friendly party: you could even argue that the BJP has consciously cultivated the media to make itself more politically acceptable. The Congress, as a natural party of power, by contrast, has been more elitist, maintaining a certain distance from the media. This might be partly explained by its ubiquitous high command culture, which somehow conveys an impression of imperious grandeur and isolationist splendour. This may not have been true of the Nehru–Rajiv era, but is certainly the case with the Age of Sonia where the party

leader prefers giving the occasional, well-choreographed sound bite even while the heir apparent Rahul has not given a single detailed one-on-one interview yet. It is almost as if there is this wall of silence which has been crafted around the Congress leadership with little space for anyone to raise uncomfortable questions.

As a result, reporting on the Congress is a bit like attempting to enter a closed, privileged circle. The few who manage to sneak in are expected to be suitably reverential to the leadership while those who are more critical are often denied access. Kidwai attempts to strike a fine balance – never easy to do for a journalist on the beat. At one level, his book is undoubtedly sympathetic to the Congress; at another level, he does make an attempt to provide a dispassionate observer's glance at affairs within the Congress palace with 24 Akbar Road as the central courtyard.

The journalistic curiosity leads to several interesting anecdotes being brought out of the inner recesses of the power elite. For example, there is this wonderful story of Rajiv Gandhi and Amitabh Bachchan meeting legendary comedian Mehmood in the late 1960s. Amitabh is looking to make a mark in films: Mehmood is impressed, but not with Amitabh as much as the young Rajiv whom he finds 'fair and good looking' and wants to sign up for a film role!

Indeed, the relationship between the Gandhis and the Bachchans has always been a source of endless political gossip. Kidwai provides the intricate details to the reader in a manner that makes that particular episode a real page-turner. Kidwai's earlier biography on Sonia Gandhi has given him a rare insight into the mind and working of one of India's most fascinating politicians. The rise of Sonia is well-captured, although just why she finally gave up her reluctance to enter formal politics is never fully explained or analyzed. Perhaps that's because the author, perhaps consciously, stays away from editorial comment and analysis. This is both a weakness of the book, and maybe even a strength, because one is spared the usual political 'gyaan'.

And yet, the question that Kidwai and other observers of the Congress need to ask is why, sixty-six years after Independence, the party that Mahatma Gandhi felt should be disbanded in 1947 and become a movement for rural re-generation, has become a party where power is confined to the privileged. The dynasty syndrome which is a constant strand through the book may have sustained the Congress leadership, but needs to be understood for what it has done to the rank and file of the Congress organization. Barring the five years of Narasimha Rao, the Congress worker has struggled to come to terms with the idea of an 'outsider' ruling it. The chapter on Sitaram Kesri, the 'old man in a hurry' who finally found solace in his pet

Pomeranian is perhaps indicative of a party structure that is umbilically tied to a single family. That family has without doubt provided the Congress with a sense of belonging and a strong leadership. But has it also ensured in the process that politics in India is a closed shop? For the dynastical principle now exists across all political parties in the countries, barring the Left, BSP, and to an extent the BJP.

In a sense, the next general election could well tell us which way Indian politics intends to move in the future. Rahul, the fifth generation of India's first family, could well find himself pitted against the BJP's Narendra Modi, a charismatic *pracharak*-politician who began his career in a sleepy village of Gujarat, helping his father serve tea at the railway station. If not quite the story of a prince and a pauper, it certainly will be a battle between a child of India's old genteel elite and a representative of an ambitious new order which is impatient for a power shift. It will also be a battle between two ideas of India: one which believes the Nehruvian ideal of a diverse society that sees the state as a benevolent enabler of rights; the other which combines assertive Hindutva 'nationalism' with the promise of a strong administration. Can Rahul provide a renewed energy to a political party in decline, or will he be, as some critics suggest, Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last ruler of the Congress empire? The answers are blowing in the wind. But a good place to start is *24 Akbar Road*, for no understanding of the present and future of the Congress can be without reference to its past.

Rajdeep Sardesai
June 2013

Introduction

As the nation enters another cycle of election, the Congress under Sonia and Rahul face multiple challenges. Is it time for the new vice-president to rise to the challenges and fill the leadership vacuum in the country, or let the people of India first respond to an assertive nationalism that promises 'strong' governance? Winston Churchill had once quipped: 'Politics is the ability to foretell what is going to happen tomorrow, next week, next month and next year – and the ability afterwards to explain why it didn't happen.'

This is not a history of the Congress. It is a story of the contemporary Congress – its key characters, its ideology, its failure and its success. This analytical account is aimed at familiarizing the readers with what distinguishes the Congress from other political parties. Normally, a political party is known for its commitment to specific economic, social and political issues, but in the case of the Congress, 'ideology' does not seem to matter in equal measure. In most cases, the Congress's concept of 'continuity with change' has helped the party tide over many crises. Even so, the Congress can by no stretch of the imagination be viewed as an ideologically-neutral organization. Over the years, the grand old party has developed an ideology of its own, albeit in a rather flexible and amorphous manner. In the constantly changing political, social and economic scenario, the Congress seems to have transformed itself to stay in touch with peoples' aspirations and the political realities of the day. The failures have been many and glaring. But in spite of its many failings, the Congress's fate and fortunes have been closely linked with that of the country.

As a reporter who has covered the Congress for many years and is constantly on the alert to exposing the party's many shortcomings, intrigues, and games of one-upmanship, I cannot help but feel a sneaking admiration for the Congress leaders' tenacious zeal, their survival instincts, and their quick wit.

This book is thus a tribute to the millions of Congress workers and activists whose ideas of freedom, nationalism, secularism, democracy and faith in humanity have given a 'life-giving ideology' to the nation. Though we live in an era in which blaming politicians for all of the nation's ills has become fashionable, I, for one, don't believe that turning to a politician is the worst way to solve a problem.

This book would not have been possible without the active support and guidance of Aveek Sarkar, my editor-in-chief at *The Telegraph*. I am extremely grateful to Rajdeep Sardesai for graciously consenting to write the introduction to this book, and to Surinder Nagar for gently reminding him to do so swiftly.

I am hugely indebted to Manini Chatterjee, R. Rajagopal, Deepayan Chatterjee, Sankarshan Thakur, Devdan Mitra and all my colleagues at *The Telegraph* Delhi Bureau for their constant encouragement.

I owe more than I can express to my wife, Dr Farah Kidwai, for her support and patience. A special mention of my brother Dr A.R. Kidwai, Sarah bhabhi, Khusro bhai, Kauser apa, Saima, Saad-Ghazia, Shahab-Sadia, Saif-Farha, Shamsi, Umair, Ayesha, Umar, Samad, Suboor, Falah, Abaan, Shad, Safia, Inaya and Ibrahim. My heartfelt gratitude to many valuable 'sources' whom I unfortunately cannot name and to those who have chosen to remain anonymous. This book would simply not have been complete without their inputs. I also wish to express my enormous debt to many leading newspapers, journals and websites, namely: the *Telegraph, The Hindu, Hindustan Times, Indian Express, India Today, Outlook, Open, Rediff,* etc. These publications have been part of my regular reading and have immensely helped me research and gather information.

Friends, namely Nirmal Pathak, Swaraj Thapa, Priya Sahgal, Rama Lakshmi, Sheela Bhatt, Radhika Ramaseshan, Anita Katyal, Sunetra Choudhury, Naghma, Bhavdeep Kang, Hartosh Singh Bal, Faisal Mohammad Ali, S.A.H. Rizvi, Avinash Dutt, Richa Sharma, Farhan Ansari, Nitin Chansoria, Naveen Shukla, Shikha Parihar and Achal Singh were a constant source of help and encouragement. Very special thanks to Shubhabrata Bhattacharya, Bharat Bhushan, Rakesh Joshi, Prakash Patra, Dr Quloob Husnain, Dr Aziz and Anjum Ansari.

Finally, Nandita Aggarwal and Amish Raj Mulmi of Hachette and my editors, Vrinda and Mimmy Jain – without them this book might have not made it into the world. I am fortunate to have editors who helped me with their suggestions and remained ever patient.

Rasheed Kidwai,
New Delhi

chapter one

Witness to a Venerable Heritage

It was on a chilly January morning in 1978 that Shoban Singh and twenty other karamcharis of the breakaway Congress, headed by former Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi first entered the portals of 24 Akbar Road.

A Type VII bungalow in Lutyens' Delhi, 24 Akbar Road belonged to G. Venkatswamy, a Rajya Sabha member of parliament (MP) from Andhra Pradesh. Venkatswamy was one of the very few who had chosen to side with Indira Gandhi at a time when most Congress leaders had distanced themselves from her, fearing that proximity to her would invite retaliation from the ruling Janata Party.

The period after the Emergency was proving a testing time for Indira Gandhi. Not only had she lost all her powers, she had also lost the official residence that went with her post. Her Mehrauli farmhouse was only half-built, and she was losing friends fast – even trusted friends. When her troubles began to escalate, family loyalist Mohammad Yunus offered his residence, 12 Willingdon Crescent, to Indira and her family as their private residence, while he moved to a property in South Delhi. Thus, 12 Willingdon Crescent became home to the Gandhis. Indira, Rajiv, his wife Sonia, their children, Rahul and Priyanka, Sanjay, Maneka, and five dogs – all moved in, leaving virtually no scope or space for any political activity from there.

Since 12 Willingdon Crescent was filled to capacity, 24 Akbar Road was chosen as the new official Congress headquarters. For the next four decades, 24 Akbar Road was to prove quite lucky for the Congress, though it might not have seemed so then, considering the state of shambles the building was in, at the time.

Facing the residence of the Chief of the Indian Air Force and the Intelligence Bureau's political surveillance unit (which still exists), it comprised five barely-furnished bedrooms, a living and dining hall, and a guest room. The outhouses were in a state of complete neglect and the garden was a mess of unruly hedges and a riot of weeds.

The advantage of the house was that it had a wicket gate link linking it to 10 Janpath, which was then the office of the Indian Youth Congress and is now the home of Congress chief Sonia Gandhi. Over the years, 10 Janpath and 24 Akbar Road forged a formidable link, bringing fame, fortune, success and eventual leadership to the

Congress.

Being taken over by the Congress was not 24 Akbar Road's first brush with history. For two years, beginning 1961, the house had played host to Aung San Suu Kyi, later Nobel laureate for Peace and leader of the non-violent movement for human rights and democracy in Myanmar.

Suu Kyi was barely fifteen, her hair in thick long plaits, when she first arrived at 24 Akbar Road with her mother, Daw Khin Kyi, Aung San's widow, who was appointed Myanmar's ambassador to India. Back then, 24 Akbar Road was called Burma House – so named by Jawaharlal Nehru in recognition of Daw Khin Kyi's special status. The house, built by Sir Edwin Lutyens between 1911 and 1925, was regarded as a singularly fine example of a blend of British colonial architecture and the new modernist style.

Suu chose for herself the room that is currently occupied by Rahul Gandhi in his capacity as vice-president of the All India Congress Committee (AICC). Suu picked this room because it had a huge piano. Every evening, a teacher would come to give her piano lessons. She quickly developed a penchant for the nuanced subtleties of Western classical music. Years later, while under house arrest in a dilapidated, lakeside habitation on University Avenue in Rangoon, Suu's fondness for the piano would provide her much-needed relief and she often played for long hours to relieve the depression of her confinement.

Suu loved 24 Akbar Road, which was imposing on the outside and wondrously cool inside with its large, elegant rooms. In his book, *The Perfect Hostage,* biographer Justin Wintle observes that it was at 24 Akbar Road that Suu experienced luxury for the first time in her life, 'even if her mother did her best to replicate the frugality that had characterized their life in Rangoon'.

It was here that Suu learnt ikebana and here that she played with Sanjay and Rajiv Gandhi in the sprawling and magnificent gardens. Both Rajiv and Sanjay were her contemporaries, one born a year before her and the other a year after. She was often seen in their company at Rashtrapati Bhavan, where they took riding lessons from the presidential bodyguards together; it is not clear, however, if Suu extended her fondness for them to their mother, Indira Gandhi.

The young girl began schooling at the Convent of Jesus and Mary, a distinguished Catholic establishment close to the Cathedral of St Joseph at Gol Dak Khana. Suu completed school and then enrolled at Lady Shri Ram College (LSR) to study political science. In 1962, the now-famous Delhi college was still in its infancy – just six years old. It was located in Daryaganj at the time and boasted just three hundred students. Its founder, Lala Shri Ram, was a leading industrialist,

philanthropist and a friend of Nehru. Suu was grounded in the basics of political thought via the classroom teaching that she received here. She learned to recognize the vital living qualities of a modern democracy – a system characterized by its 'multi-voicedness'. Her time in India contributed greatly to crafting Suu Kyi into the politicized entity she is today.

At LSR, Suu was introduced to a formal and pedagogic way of politics and the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, whose advocacy of non-violence and passive resistance based on civil disobedience and satyagraha provided a model for opposing authoritarian regimes and became embedded in Suu's mindset.

Years later, she was heard quoting what she had imbibed and learned while living at 24 Akbar Road and studying at LSR in her famous Freedom from Fear speech, made in 1990 (*Parade Magazine*, 19 January 1997): 'It is not power that corrupts, but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it.'

At another level, 24 Akbar Road 'reunited' the Nehru–Gandhi family's links to the Mughals, even if only through a road named after the greatest Mughal emperor, Akbar. The Nehrus were initially Kauls of Kashmir, who were invited to Delhi in 1716 by the Mughal king, Farrukh Siyar, who had a sense of scholarship and was known to lend his patronage to poets and men of letters in his grand durbar.

In a note on his family history, Jawaharlal Nehru's father Pandit Motilal Nehru quoted his elder brother as saying that the Nehrus traced their descent from a famous eighteenth-century scholar and historian called Pandit Raj Narayan Kaul. In 1710, Kaul published a history of Kashmir, *Tariqui-Kashmir*, which was considered a pioneering work of that era. King Farrukh Siyar is said to have been deeply impressed by Kaul and invited him to live in Delhi. During that time, an 'invitation' from a Mughal king was in effect an order – the Kauls had to leave Kashmir, however unwilling they might have been to do so. Subsequently, Kaul was called to the Lal Qila for an audience, where Farrukh Siyar granted him a jagir or fiefdom of some villages and a haveli in Chandni Chowk. The Mughal king was weak and short of actual cash, but rewarded Kaul generously from what he had at his disposal.

The handsome Mughal king Farrukh Siyar fancied himself 'Akbar Sani' (Akbar the Second), but he lacked his ancestor's character and ability to rule with élan. For the most part of his brief tenure (1713–19), he struggled to survive the palace intrigues of the Syed brothers, who held effective power in his kingdom, albeit behind the façade of Mughal rule. As the Kauls got used to the comforts of Delhi, Farrukh

Siyar was beset with problems more pressing than the fate of Persian literature. His reign ended on a humiliating and painful note – on 28 February 1719, a few days after being deposed and subsequently imprisoned and starved, the king was blinded with needles on the order of the Syed brothers. Farrukh Siyar died an inglorious and excruciatingly painful death; he was strangled to death on the night of 27 April 1719.

Kaul lost his imperial patronage, but his house was not taken away from him. Motilal Nehru knew very little about the exact location of Pandit Raj Narayan Kaul's haveli in Chandni Chowk, except that it stood by a canal. This canal was to play an important role in the future history of their family. The word for canal in Persian is '*nahar*', which in Urdu became '*nehar*'. The local people addressed Pandit Kaul 'as the one who lived by the canal' hence 'Nehru'.

Family sources and historians are silent on what happened to the Nehrus for the next century and a bit. Even Motilal Nehru did not know the names of his forefathers from Pandit Kaul to the Nehrus of 1816, forty-five years before he himself was born in 1861.

The Nehrus rose from obscurity when Laxmi Narayan Nehru became the first vakil of the East India Company. Laxmi Narayan's son, Gangadhar Nehru, was a police official when the first War of Independence took place in 1857. Thousands of Delhiites had to flee the city at the time. Among them were Gangadhar, his wife Jeorani, two sons Bansidhar and Nandlal, and two daughters. The family was almost killed when British soldiers mistook one of the daughters for an English girl, so light was her skin. Bansi's knowledge of English saved them.

Gangadhar died in Agra in 1861. Jeorani was six months pregnant with Motilal Nehru at the time. Bansidhar, who worked as a scribe at the Agra judicial court, looked after his mother and infant brother. He rose to become a subordinate magistrate.

Nandlal started off as a schoolteacher and later became chief minister to the ruler of Khetri, a small principality in Rajputana close to Agra. In 1870, Nandlal continued the family tradition and was among the first Indians to qualify as a lawyer. He began practising in the Agra Court when Motilal was nine. Motilal finished his matriculation and moved to Allahabad to enrol at Muir Central College, run by the British. After obtaining a law degree from Cambridge in 1883 and receiving the prestigious Lumbsdon Medal, Motilal became Nandlal's partner.

Motilal was twenty-five when he married Swaroop Rani. The fourteen-year-old girl was his second wife. Motilal's first wife had died during childbirth, and their only child, Ratanlal, had died at the age of

three. Swaroop Rani was petite with a 'Dresden China perfection and features, hazel eyes, chestnut brown hair and exquisitely shaped hands and feet'. (Nanda, B.R., *Motilal and Jawaharlal*, George Allen, London, 1962.)

Swaroop Rani reportedly took time to adjust to Motilal's household because of the age difference between her husband and herself and because of her mother-in-law's dominating and formidable attitude.

Jawaharlal was born on 14 November 1889. There is a story about his miraculous conception, though there is no mention of any such story in Motilal's writings. The story goes that Motilal and his friends had gone to Rishikesh, where they met a yogi who lived on a tree. One of his friends told the yogi about Motilal's desire for a son. The yogi told them that Motilal was not destined to have a son. At that point, another friend told the yogi that he, as a 'blessed' man, could change Motilal's destiny if he so desired. So the yogi sprinkled water from his pot before Motilal three times and then he paled visibly. He told Motilal that he had used the fruits of his penance of many lifetimes to pay for this boon. The following day, the yogi passed away.

When he was in his early thirties, Motilal was earning more than two thousand rupees a month – this at a time when a schoolteacher of that period was paid a mere ten rupees. He moved to a posh locality in Allahabad, 9 Elgin Road, where, impressed by the Western lifestyle, he reportedly ordered that only English should be spoken. But most of the women of the household were not conversant with English, so the decree was reluctantly withdrawn.

In 1900, when Jawaharlal was eleven years old, Motilal bought a palatial residence at 1 Church Road, Allahabad, for a sum of 19,000 rupees. The house was in complete disrepair, but the estate was huge – with lawns, fruit gardens and even a swimming pool. The renovation work saw each room fitted with electricity and water. The bathrooms boasted flush toilets, a first in Allahabad. Motilal used his frequent visits to Europe to buy the choicest furniture and china. He called the house 'Anand Bhavan' (Abode of Joy). For the next several decades, the mansion, which housed three generations of the Nehru–Gandhis, was witness to the changing course of Indian history and politics.

Later, in 1930, Motilal built another house next to his old one and named that Anand Bhavan; the old house was renamed Swaraj Bhavan and donated to the nation. In 1969, Indira followed in her grandfather's footsteps and gave away Anand Bhavan to the nation. Anand Bhavan had served as the Congress party headquarters during the days of the freedom struggle. In January 1931, the Congress Working Committee (CWC), the party's apex decision-making body,

had as its members Motilal (on his deathbed then), Jawaharlal, his wife, Kamla, and Ranjit Sitaram Pandit (the husband of Jawaharlal's sister, Vijaya Lakshmi). The headquarters were moved to 7 Jantar Mantar Road in New Delhi after 1947 – a move that cost the Congress party a little over seven lakh rupees.

Jawaharlal and Kamla had a suite on the top floor of the new Anand Bhavan. Their daughter, Indira, had a separate room with a bath. Out in the garden, she loved strolling amidst the English roses and termed this time as among the best of her life. Of course, this opulence stung a lot of people. A day after the Nehrus moved to their new house – without the customary grihapravesh puja – Allahabad's English daily, ran a photograph with the caption, 'How our poor politicians live'. (Moraes, Dom, *Mrs Gandhi*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1980.)

Today, the rooms that Jawaharlal and his family occupied have been converted into a museum and and have been sealed off. Visitors can peer through the windows and see the rooms where the CWC meetings were held. The room in which Indira was born on 19 November 1917 is open to visitors.

Both Motilal and Jawaharlal were avid readers. While Motilal's collection of books consisted of legal tomes, Jawaharlal possessed copies of the works of Honoré de Balzac, Charles Dickens, Arthur Koestler, Ernst Toller, Somerset Maugham and Evelyn Waugh. He also read books about different countries, and on gardening, photography, and palmistry.

Speaking to biographer Dom Moraes Indira recalled:

'The house was always full of activity. It was full of people. But I preferred Swaraj Bhavan to Anand Bhavan. It was more like a home. We used to hide Congress party-workers on the run from the British. One night, we had someone wounded. All the women of the house acted as nurses, including me.'

Indira's sense of belonging with Anand Bhavan and Swaraj Bhavan was intense. In 1969 when a group of senior partymen called the 'Syndicate Clique' evicted her from the Congress, leading to a split in the party, an emotional Indira insisted that Congress membership was her 'birthright' and that she had been irrevocably born a Congress person many years ago in Anand Bhavan.

'Nobody can throw me out of the Congress. It is not a legal question, nor one of passing a resolution to pronounce an expulsion order. It is a question of the very fibre of one's heart and being.'

After the 1969 split, her sect of Congress emerged as the 'real Congress' and Indira did not regret splitting the party over her choice of presidential nominee – V.V. Giri against the old guards' choice of

Neelam Sanjiva Reddy. Indira's party was called Requisitionist or Congress (Ruling) because they subsequently requisitioned a meeting of the CWC, the party MPs and the AICC to challenge Congress chief S. Nijalingappa's decision to 'expel' Indira from the party.

Indira managed to win the support of 310 of the total 429 members of parliament belonging to the party. At the AICC meet on 22 November 1969, 446 out of 705 delegates accepted her leadership.

'I am not afraid to say that the Congress has become moribund. It has scarcely a single leader with a modern mind… Congress has never succeeded in evolving into a modern political party,' she said. (Frank, Katherine, *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi,* HarperCollins, London, 2001).

The Congress split of 1969 was significant on many counts. As a result of the split, Indira's Congress lost control over 7 Jantar Mantar, where the party office had been housed since Independence. Indira set up a temporary party office at Windsor Place at the residence of Congress party loyalist M.V. Krishnappa, who had served as a junior minister in Nehru's cabinet. In 1971, the Congress office moved to 5 Rajendra Prasad Road and from there to 24 Akbar Road in 1978. The Congress made several bids to wrest control of 7 Jantar Mantar Road, but without success.

7 Jantar Mantar Road had seen its fair share of history. Jawaharlal Nehru had spent a lot of time here, attending to Congress work, screening membership forms and writing letters to the party's state and district chiefs. The house had witnessed Indira's appointment as Congress president when in 1959 Nehru declared that he would like his daughter to take over the party. Party members were surprised, but Nehru's word was holy writ in those days and his daughter was duly elected.

According to the official records of the Union Urban Development ministry, 7 Jantar Mantar Road was allotted to the Congress in the year that Indira took on the party presidency. After the 1969 split, the Congress (Organization) took possession of 7 Jantar Mantar Road. When the Morarji Desai-led Congress (O) merged with the Janata Party in 1977, Desai, who was then prime minister, cleverly took control of 7 Jantar Mantar by forming a separate trust in the name of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, called the Sardar Patel Smarak Sansthan, which owned the building. Only the second floor was rented out to the Janata Party, which was then in power. S. Nijalingappa's death in 2000 heralded the death of all the original trustees of the trust.

Many years later, under Sonia Gandhi, the Congress tried to regain control of the building, pointing out that the trust had become defunct. The AICC's general secretary, Oscar Fernandes, wrote to the

Congress chief minister of Delhi, Sheila Dixit, claiming ownership. Oscar wanted the Registrar of Trusts, which comes under the state government, to revive the Sardar Patel Smarak Sansthan by appointing AICC office-bearers as its trustees.

But a political faux pas messed things up again. The Dixit government tried to get 7 Jantar Mantar Road registered directly in the name of the Congress party and sought a no-objection certificate from the urban development ministry, which was then headed by Jagmohan Malhotra – who had been Sanjay Gandhi's confidant during the Emergency. Jagmohan, who had indulged in a wide spectrum of ideologies before joining the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), firmly denied the Congress its former place of work. Oscar repeatedly visited Jagmohan in his Nirman Bhavan office, but Jagmohan kept referring him to L.K. Advani in North Block or Ram Jethmalani and Arun Jaitley, who manned the Union law ministry. The impasse continued till Oscar conceded defeat. Apparently, there were numerous authorized and unauthorized tenants and sub-tenants in the three-storey building on Jantar Mantar Road, including the Janata Dal (United), which was part of the then ruling National Democratic Alliance coalition and had no intention of moving out.

The Congress might have lost 7 Jantar Mantar Road, but Indira grew in stature after the 1969 split. She had gained popularity not only from her victory in the dispute over the candidature of the presidential polls, but also from her decisions to nationalize private banks and to stop the Privy Purse. The issue of taking away the perks and privileges of former rulers was first raised at 7 Jantar Mantar Road by Indira at a CWC meeting in May 1967. Her finance minister, Morarji Desai, opposed it on the grounds that it would be unethical for a Congress government to break the agreement.

The Privy Purse was a payment made to the royal families of erstwhile princely states as part of their agreements to first integrate with India in 1947, and later to merge their states in 1949 whereby they lost all ruling rights. In addition to privileges such as gun-salutes and titles, about a hundred crore of tax-free money was paid to 565 'parasitical puppets'. For example, in the late Sixties, the Nizam of Hyderabad, the highest recipient, was being paid about 8 crore rupees a year. Socialist writers like K.A. Abbas felt that more than the money, the very idea that some people enjoyed a life of such luxury out of their 'fabulous, unearned and untaxed purses' was abhorrent. (Abbas, K.A., *That Woman: Indira Gandhi's Seven Years in Power,* Indian Books Company, New Delhi, 1973).

When the bill abolishing the Privy Purse was moved in Parliament, Indira Gandhi urged members to vote 'in accordance with

the spirit of times'. She admitted that while the abolition of the Privy Purse might not solve perennial problems of poverty, unemployment, etc., yet it was still a 'step in the particular direction in which the country wants to go and will go in spite of anybody. If we do not take it, we will be swept aside'.

By the time the bill was passed in the Lok Sabha in 1971, many erstwhile royals had decided to contest the Lok Sabha elections of 1971 to seek the voters' mandate. Except for Rajasthan, where the Congress received a sound drubbing, most former nawabs, maharajas and ranis were defeated by huge margins. Mansoor Ali Khan Pataudi, who represented both the nawabs of Bhopal and Pataudi, chose to contest from Gurgaon as a nominee of the Vishal Haryana Party, but the charming cricketer got less than 5 per cent of the votes.

Desai had always been an egocentric man and had refused to accept Indira as his leader in spite of being a minister under her. For years, he had nursed a grudge for not being considered for the prime minister's post after Nehru's death in May 1964. The CWC had authorized the then party chief, K. Kamaraj, to make a recommendation for Nehru's successor. Kamaraj had picked Lal Bahadur Shastri over Desai, and then he had practically bullied Desai into accepting Shastri. According to V.K. Krishna Menon, a close associate of Nehru's and a former defence minister of the country, there were heated discussions about the succession in the room where Nehru's body lay.

'None of them had the decency to keep their mouths shut till he was cremated,' observed Menon who was personally present at the occasion. (Adams, Jad and Whitehead, Philip, *The Dynasty: The Nehru–Gandhi Story,* Penguin Books/ BBC Books, London, 1997.) Menon himself proved to be something of a baffling personality whose role as the defence minister of the country during 1962 Sino-Indian conflict reduced the statesman and freedom fighter to someone who 'inspired a few, infuriated many and embarrassed all'.

Morarji Desai was better known for his peculiar food and drink habits than his prime-ministership. In 1978, after he became prime minister, he disclosed to Dan Rather on the *60 Minutes* show that he was a long-time practitioner of urine therapy. He insisted that urine therapy was the perfect medical solution for the millions of Indians who could not afford medical treatment. Desai lived till he was ninety-nine, raising speculation about the efficacy of his preferred therapy.

Desai was also known for his phlegmatic and unemotional nature. K. Sankaran Nair, who served as head of the Intelligence Bureau and RAW, recalls an incident about Desai in his memoirs, *Inside IB and RAW: The Rolling Stones that Gathered Moss*. Apparently, when Desai

was chief minister of the Bombay Presidency, an aide came up to him and hesitantly informed him that Desai's daughter-in-law had committed suicide. Apparently Desai muttered, 'Silly girl!', and carried on working on the files on his table.

Desai fancied himself a Gandhian, but as finance minister under Indira, he acted as an apologist and defender of the privileged and the rich. Perhaps he underestimated Indira's abilities to make do with less like most of the country's populace, which had prepared her well to run a kitchen as large as India.

Writer and filmmaker Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, a close friend of Nehru's, witnessed Indira's economic acumen first-hand in August 1954. Abbas had just screened his film, *Munna*, the first songless Hindi movie, for a select audience including Nehru. Nehru, a film buff, was so moved by child star Master Romi's performance that he invited him for breakfast the next morning. Abbas asked Nehru if the entire unit, including the other actors and technicians, could accompany Romi. Before answering him Nehru called up Indira and asked her in a lowered voice, 'Indu, have we got enough cereal and eggs to invite this whole gang for breakfast?'

Later, Abbas met up with Indira and asked her why she had not said an outright yes to her father's query. To the filmmaker's surprise, the prime minister's daughter, who ran the household at Teen Murti House said: 'It's no joke running the house of a hospitable and large-hearted man like my father on the fixed salary that he gets!'

Indira told Abbas that quite often the prime minister's salary was not enough to pay the grocer's bills and that, at the end of the year, Nehru owed a substantial amount to various creditors. The debts were paid when the prime minister received his yearly royalties from the foreign publishers of his books.

Sensing Desai's resentment, Indira had him removed and took over as the country's finance minister in July 1969.

Soon after taking over the additional charge of finance minister, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi visited the Congress headquarters at 7 Jantar Mantar and sounded out the party general secretaries on whether public ownership of banks would help mobilize national resources for the 'greater good'.

To her delight she got overwhelming support and unanimous approval for the Banking Companies (Acquisition and Transfer of Undertakings) Ordinance, 1969. That very night, she made an announcement to the effect on All India Radio – taking Desai and the rest by surprise. Indira's move to nationalize banks won the people's hearts. (A demonstration of the common man's faith in her 'new Congress' was evident from the fact that the Shoeshine Boys' Union

offered free shoeshines to all AICC delegates to show their gratitude to the party!)

With one stroke of her pen, Indira nationalized fourteen leading banks. The biggest of these was Central Bank, controlled by the Tatas with deposits of more than four billion rupees. The smallest was the Bank of Maharashtra, set up by Prof. V.G. Kale and D.K. Sathe in Pune in 1935, with seven hundred million rupees. The blow Indira had struck fell on other big business houses, too – the Birlas who ran United Commercial Bank, the Dalmia-Jains who owned Punjab National Bank, and some Gujarati entrepreneurs who held large stakes in Dena Bank. An economic survey of twenty leading banks of that era showed that 188 persons who served as directors were also directors of 1452 companies! The large funds that they had used to acquire private profit and privileges were now open to public good – to finance the rural sector of the economy and to lend money to farmers to buy tractors, and to taxi drivers to buy cabs.

On the eve of Independence Day 1970, Indira visited the AICC office and began consulting colleagues about the objective of achieving a socialistic society.

'There must be a steady narrowing of inequalities and the enlargement of income earning opportunities for the weaker sections of society,' she said, adding: 'We need to enlarge the area of socialism.' (AICC session, 13 June 1970, New Delhi.)

Indira questioned why an independent country like India should flaunt a culture of gun salutes and titles. These ornamental and illusionary titles were taken very seriously by the hundreds of feudal princes spread all over the country. The Scindias of Gwalior were among the five most illustrious Indian royal families, the others being those of Jammu & Kashmir, Baroda, Hyderabad and Mysore, and all five had merited a twenty-one-gun salute during British Raj. Indira felt that it was scandalous that about a billion rupees of taxpayers' money should be paid (tax free) to feed a hundred 'parasitical puppets' even twenty years after Independence. The Nizam of Hyderabad was the biggest recipient of the Privy Purse. His tax-free pension was more than eighty million rupees a year!

When Indira moved the 24th Constitutional Amendment Bill in the Lok Sabha, there was a huge hue and cry led by the Jan Sangh's Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who alleged that Indira was acting under pressure from the communists. In reply, Indira spoke not like a political strategist, but as a compassionate social philosopher. She admitted that while the abolition of the Privy Purse and princely privileges was not going to solve poverty, unemployment or any other problem, it was a step in the right direction whose time had come:

'If we do not take (such a step), we will be swept aside,' she said.

The Congress old guard, which had formed the Congress (O), voted against the bill along with the Swatantra Party and the Jan Sangh.

Many years later, on 16 June 2009, Sonia coaxed the former rajas, maharajas and maharanis in the Congress to shed their royal honorifics, directing all mention of royal titles to be purged from the Congress's official records. Some Congressmen, such as Jyotiraditya Scindia, Jitin Prasada, R.P.N. Singh and Ratna Singh, were using their 'titles' in their profiles on the Lok Sabha website. Prasada and Singh had attached 'kunwar' (denoting a minor prince) to their names and Ratna had tagged herself 'rajkumari' (princess) on the website.

A story that did the rounds of Congress circles for a long time was that the surest way of bagging a quick appointment with Jyotiraditya Scindia or his father, the late Madhavrao Scindia, was to refer to them as 'maharaja'. At Madhavrao's election meetings, people were often addressed as 'Gwalior *ki praja* (subjects)'. When Jyotiraditya's aunt, Yashodhara Raje, was a minister in Madhya Pradesh's BJP government, a notification asked the staff to address her as 'shrimant'.

The list of Congress leaders using royal tags was long. Arjun Singh fancied himself a 'kunwar', while former Punjab chief minister Amarinder Singh insisted upon being called the maharaja of Patiala. His politician wife, Praneet Kaur, was addressed as maharani. Digvijaya Singh is, rather irreverently, called 'Diggy Raja'. Indira's move to abolish the Privy Purse ran into trouble, however, when the Supreme Court pronounced that the presidential decree was legally invalid.

Still, the enthusiasm generated by the bank nationalization and the abolition of the Privy Purse convinced her that the masses were itching to remove these social inequalities. Explaining her unusual step to call for early polls, Indira addressed the nation on All India Radio and said:

'It is because we are not merely concerned with remaining in power, but (because we want) to ensure a better life to the vast majority of our people, and to satisfy their aspirations for a just social order.' She concluded by saying, 'Power in a democracy resides with the people. That is why we have decided to go to our people and to seek a fresh mandate from them.'

Like Roosevelt, Indira could have tried to 'pack' the apex court with 'favourable judges' but she was confident that the outgoing Lok Sabha did not reflect the ground-level political situation prevailing in the country. The subsequent poll results showed that the masses had begun to feel that Indira meant business when it came to removing social inequalities. Instead of using a Constitutional stratagem, she had chosen to go to the people.

At another level, Indira's zeal to move with the times was also evident in the manner in which she gave up the party office, 7 Jantar Mantar, when the party's central office changed location, first to 5 Rajendra Prasad Road in 1971, and then finally to 24 Akbar Road, in January 1978.

Indira was greatly pained to lose her party's invaluable archives, but when she returned to power with a thumping majority in 1980, she refused to stake claim on 7 Jantar Mantar. 'I have built the party from scratch, not once, but twice. The new office premises will rejuvenate the party rank and file for decades,' she told Sanjay, when her politician son broached the subject of returning to 7 Jantar Mantar.

Post Emergency, the bitter split of 1978 had left the Indira Congress with absolutely nothing. The then office secretary, Saddiq Ali, had declined to hand over any official records, papers, or books to Indira. So, the party no longer had any files, old records, correspondence, office stationery, flags, or typewriters. When Buta Singh, A.R. Antulay and others moved inside 24 Akbar Road in January 1978, they arrived empty-handed.

However Indira's words proved prophetic. 24 Akbar Road provided a new lease of life to the Congress. Like the Mughal emperor after whom the road on which it stands is named, 24 Akbar Road struggled and faltered in its nascent stages, but managed to stand on its feet in such a manner that it provided strength and stability to the Congress for decades to come.

Once inside 24 Akbar Road, Shoban Singh and other Congress workers tried to organize rooms for the party's office-bearers: AICC chief Indira Gandhi, general secretaries A.R. Antulay, Buta Singh, A.P. Singh and B.P. Maurya, and treasurer Pranab Mukherjee. The largest room, which used to serve as a living and dining hall, was converted into the president's office. A cane chair and a small table were organized, but the walls remained bare. There was no carpet, not even a doormat. Buta Singh took over one of the bedrooms and began conducting interviews for office staff.

Shoban Singh, who by 2009 had 52 years of uninterrupted service with the Congress, recalled:

'Buta Singhji said the party was not in a position to pay me the salary of eight hundred rupees a month that I had been getting. I said I would not take any salary till the situation improved. Buta Singhji stood up and hugged me.'

Today, 24 Akbar Road has changed dramatically in appearance. Its eight rooms have expanded to thirty-four. While the main bungalow has remained more or less intact, it has had five ancillary portions

added to it. The main bungalow is occupied by the Congress president, the party treasurer and senior AICC general secretaries. At the entrance, you usually find sundry office-bearers lounging about by a nearly-depleted library. At the back of the house now stands a row of more than a dozen rooms constructed during the P.V. Narasimha Rao regime. Then there are two blocks of outhouses, a square of ten rooms that accommodates most of the secretarial staff, and the residential block, which has dozens of low-roof structures that house the party *karamcharis* and their families. Each of these houses is now fitted with an electric meter, a satellite dish, a refrigerator, an air-conditioner and an air cooler.

Most of these constructions are illegal, but successive political regimes have looked the other way. In fact, each time the Congress has ruled Delhi, the urban development or housing minister has made it a point to prove his loyalty by bending and flouting rules even further, to let 24 Akbar Road expand from within.

Buta Singh, who served as works and housing minister under Indira (1983–84), and Sheila Kaul, Rajiv Gandhi's maternal aunt, who was the works and housing minister under Narasimha Rao, used to visit 24 Akbar Road with dozens of officials in tow. These ministers were often seen supervising and consulting Central Public Works Department (CPWD) engineers on how to construct more rooms. The CPWD officials readily suggested the construction of false ceilings, tin sheds and other means, against the rules in most cases, flagrantly violating the spirit of urban development by laws.

Interestingly though, from Indira to Sonia, while successive Congress presidents have kept increasing the number of rooms at 24 Akbar Road, none of them has bothered to increase the number of toilets so that there are adequate facilities for the occupants and the numerous daily visitors. The AICC chief and eleven general secretaries have the privilege of washrooms attached to their rooms, but the rest of the hundred-odd office-bearers and their visitors have to make do with two stinking public urinals in the most disgusting surroundings. Women are worse off for they do not have a single dedicated washroom even at a time when Sonia and her party seem determined to push through the Women's Reservation Bill that will empower women with 33 per cent reservation in all legislative bodies in the country, including the Lok Sabha!

In 1999, a somewhat-functional, but rather dilapidated, toilet near the AICC's media department was demolished to accommodate AICC secretaries Satyajit Gaikwad and Kumari Selja. Gaikwad, who belongs to the royal Gaikwad family of Baroda (now called Vadodara), decided he needed a different entrance to his room when he had one man too many visit his office in search of relieving an overfull bladder.

Maybe Sulabh International should make a bid for 24 Akbar Road! The proposition might even interest the AICC treasurer, Motilal Vora. After all, this would be one sure way to generate funds, considering the success of Sulabh International's paid toilet scheme in parts of New Delhi! Perhaps this oversight is reflective of the fact that more than sixty years after the country's independence, six hundred million people, or 55 per cent of Indians are still left without access to proper toilet facilities.

The constant and significant changes in its physical appearance have kept pace with the drastic and sometimes unconventional events that have taken place at 24 Akbar Road. In many ways, the national headquarter of the Congress mirrors what ails the party and the way in which a blend of innovative ideas, charismatic leadership and a pragmatic approach has sustained the Congress legacy.

In technological terms, the office of the country's most important political party is also the most primitive. Far from being Wi-Fi-enabled, most AICC office-bearers – including the general secretaries – do not even have personal computers. Every communication or office order moves in physical form from table to table, back and forth from 24 Akbar Road to 10 Janpath. Each day, this mammoth exercise is conducted with the help of several peons and messengers. The concept of a paperless office is so alien to the AICC general secretaries that they are ready to break into heated argument, questioning the confidentiality and effectiveness of e-communication.

As Congress chief, Sonia Gandhi did try to usher in change. In 1999, she constituted a research and reference wing for the party, the Department of Information, Publicity and Communication (DIPCO). A separate house, 99 South Avenue, which belonged to industrialist R.P. Goenka (he served as a Rajya Sabha member), was given to a team consisting of Salman Khurshid, Jairam Ramesh and Prithviraj Chavan. But the party's best and brightest faces prefer to fight among themselves rather than bring out a credible paper or policy document. By 2004, things came to such a pass that Sonia had to ask party treasurer Vora to lock up the premises and stop the funding for the department.

There is complete lack of transparency in terms of salary structure and funds within the AICC. Most AICC employees are paid as per the whims of the party treasurer. Simple work norms such as provident fund, gratuity and health insurance are denied to them. Even political functionaries are given a monthly stipend that is inconsistent with their lifestyle. For instance, each AICC general secretary (among them, Rahul Gandhi, Digvijaya Singh, Ahmed Patel, B.K. Hariprasad, etc.) is paid nine thousand rupees in cash (through a voucher system). However, this income is in addition to their income as MPs or their

perks as an ex-chief minister or central minister.

The funding of state and parliamentary polls has always been shrouded in mystery. During the 2007 assembly polls, the Congress blew up huge sums of money in Uttar Pradesh, but netted a mere twenty-two seats and came second in another twenty-three out of a total of 403 seats. In the 2012 assembly polls, the Congress's tally went up from twenty-two to an equally pathetic twenty-eight seats, yet, no CWC meeting was convened at 24 Akbar Road to discuss this colossal failure. The fifty Congress candidates who were placed in Category A by the party high command and given the best 'resources' secured less than 5,000 votes. In other words, they forfeited even their deposits. If party-men are to be believed, each vote in these constituencies cost the Congress more than a thousand rupees.

On 28 December 2009, the Congress celebrated its hundred and twenty-fifth foundation day. Sonia described the Congress as a 'national revolution' that led the country to Independence from imperialist rule. Addressing the party-men, she said:

'The party has always promoted secularism through a consensual approach and has stood for the protection of the rights of the poor.'

The anniversary function was held at Indira Gandhi Bhavan on Kotla Road in New Delhi, which is to be the new headquarters of the AICC.

Actually the plot for the new premises is on the corner of Kotla Road and Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Marg. But the Congress, reluctant to have the name of its headquarters associated with that of Bharatiya Janata Party ideologue Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, has decided to have the entrance on Kotla Road.

As per the rules formulated by the Union urban development ministry, the Congress was entitled to a four-acre plot as per its existing strength in two houses of Parliament in 2009. But the party accepted a smaller plot on Kotla Road as it already has another one on Rajendra Prasad Road – which currently houses the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation headed by Sonia in memory of the former prime minister. The Congress party's general secretary Janardan Dwivedi said:

'We were entitled to a four-acre plot as the party has more than 200 members of parliament. However, since an allotment had been made earlier for Jawahar Bhavan (office of Rajiv Gandhi Foundation), we were given two acres. We plan to construct a six-storey building on this plot as it is the maximum permissible limit in the area.'

In 1985–86, Rajiv wanted to shift to a 'modern office'. He sought donations and all the Congress MPs gave up a month's salary for the new building at Rajendra Prasad Road, which was to serve as the party's central office. But Rajiv's sudden death in May 1991 changed

everything.

As a goodwill gesture, in an emotionally-charged atmosphere, the party 'loaned' the premises to the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation. The RGF was a brainchild of Sonia's, it was set up to work in areas that were of the deepest concern to Rajiv, and to act as a catalyst in promoting effective and sustainable ideas towards realizing his dreams.

However, political commentators were dismayed to note that the foundation-day speeches of the Congress party's president and its prime minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, attempted to do little more than squeeze the history of the party into a Nehru–Gandhi straitjacket. Sonia and Manmohan spoke at length, but they failed to address the serious challenges before the party or chart a blueprint for the renewal of India as a vibrant democratic republic.

A few days after the Indira Bhavan foundation stone was laid, noted editor Bharat Bhushan wrote in the *Mail Today* newspaper:

'But can the party sustain the middle class island, admittedly growing all the time, as the end of politics, while a desolate periphery remains poor, deprived and angry? The residents of the periphery have to be taken along, not only as a huge market, but also as fellow citizens. All major changes and societal transformation originate amongst those on the margins of society and not from those who are its main beneficiaries and by definition status quoists. History is replete with examples of how unaware the status-quoists remain till the very end when they are suddenly overwhelmed by transformational politics.'

Though the Congress won two successive general elections under Sonia in 2004 and 2009, proving most political pundits wrong, her best men and women in the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government were those who seemed to have a patron-client relationship with either her or her acolytes. In 2009, none of the AICC general secretaries occupying the big rooms at 24 Akbar Road, except Rahul Gandhi, had won a parliamentary election. As a result, they had little to contribute in terms of generating new ideas and issues into the party's programmatic agenda. Some of them were more corporate-style managers than politicians who were in touch with the people. These 'non-accountable' leaders often lacked the ideological clarity of which the Congress was so proud and they were unable to come up with any out-of-the-box ideas. A senior party leader who had seen a vibrant party office during the Rajiv era wondered if the 'in power' Congress had assumed a negative role with its functionaries acting more to kill or blunt any fresh initiative, rather than putting in processes whereby the party could make collective use of the talent it had at its command.

Critics said 2004–09 saw the UPA under Manmohan Singh coming

up with many pathbreaking measures, such as the Right to Information Act (RTI), the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, the right to education, and the Indo–US civil and nuclear deal, but none of these ideas were initially conceptualized at 24 Akbar Road. There are dozens of other similar significant issues in which the Congress has shied away from taking a firm position. For instance, prior to the 2004 general elections, Sonia talked a great deal about the need for job reservations in the private sector, but the issue was not raised at all, once the party won the elections.

In May 1999, a storm brought down a large tree on the premises of 24 Akbar Road. Not only did the tree kill an eight-year-old boy, it also demolished a makeshift temple inside the party office. The tree and the temple held a special significance for the thousands who thronged 24 Akbar Road periodically, seeking election tickets. It was a place where the faithful brought offerings and where sceptics dozed in the shade.

Old-timers recalled the history of the temple and the tree. The tree had been there when the Congress office moved to 24 Akbar Road in 1978 after the split in the party. The temple had been constructed by a holy man from Karnataka after he had been given a party ticket. Many ticket aspirants believed that the temple deity and the tree had the power to grant the fulfilment of one's political aspirations!

The fall of the more than a century-old tree rattled many. Most AICC general secretaries rushed out of their offices wondering how the tree had fallen so easily in a storm that had lasted a mere ten minutes. When the news reached Sonia late that night, a visibly upset AICC chief demanded to know how such a strong tree had collapsed so suddenly. She was told the tree had had a 'weak foundation' – that its roots had been decaying for a very long time.

Some disgruntled party-men went a step further, drawing a parallel between the fallen tree and the Congress and claiming that the tree and the party were probably of the same age. The tree had appeared invincible till it had suddenly collapsed without warning. The Congress under Sonia in 1999 looked good, but its roots were decaying as the party was then hopelessly placed in big states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu.

However, 24 Akbar Road proved the cynics wrong when the Congress proceeded to march forward onto two back-to-back electoral successes in 2004 and 2009.

chapter two

A Mother and Her Son

When Indira was born on 19 November 1917, the Scottish doctor who was attending to Kamla Nehru announced to Jawaharlal Nehru, 'It is a bonny lassie, sir!'

The womenfolk around Jawaharlal's mother, Swaroop Rani, pulled long faces in sympathy. This irritated his father, Motilal, prompting him to chide his wife, 'You must not say such a thing. Have we made a distinction between our son and two daughters in their upbringing? Do you not love them equally? This daughter of Jawahar's, for all you know, may prove to be better than a thousand sons.'

The baby was named Indira by Swaroop Rani, who was a strong-willed and dominating woman. Jawaharlal and Kamla wanted to name their daughter Priyadarshani ('dear to behold'), so she was named Indira Priyadarshani. As per the Nehrus' custom, after a few days, the young baby was taken to the major-domo of the house, the ailing Mubarak Ali.

Wrapped in an exquisite Kashmiri shawl, Indira was carried to Mubarak Ali's cottage. When the pink and white baby was placed in Munshiji's outstretched hands, tears of joy rolled down the old man's cheeks, wetting his long white beard. He looked up to Motilal, Jawaharlal, Kamla, Swaroop Rani and the rest and said, 'Mubarak ho, Bhai and Bhabhi Saheb. May Allah's blessings go with the child, who should be a worthy heir to Jawahar as Jawahar has proved a worthy and wonderful son to you, and may the child illuminate the name of Nehru.'

According to Indira's aunt, Krishna Nehru Hutheesing, who was present when Mubarak Ali said this, Munshiji was told that the baby was a girl, but he kept addressing her as the 'grandson' of Motilal Nehru.

Munshiji's words came true many years later. In 1999, a worldwide poll conducted by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) voted Indira as the 'greatest woman' of the last thousand years. Her life and achievments edged out other notables such as Queen Elizabeth I, Marie Curie and Mother Teresa – even Aung San Suu Kyi, who had once lived at 24 Akbar Road. The BBC described Indira as 'a true feminist to the core, a woman of substance who helped the

country through a testing phase, possessed all the virtues of a woman and fought valiantly for women's rights in a man's world'.

Mubarak's great-grandson Ashraf was at 24 Akbar Road on 3 November 1984, when Indira's body, draped in the tricolour, was brought into the party office before being taken to be cremated at Nigambodh Ghat. Ashraf wept bitterly, recalling how the Nehrus and Gandhis had transformed the lives of generations of his family.

Ashraf's grandfather, Mubarak's son Manzar, had taken up arms to resist the British Raj around 1907, when Jawaharlal was studying at Trinity College in the UK. When Motilal Nehru came to know that Manzar had become a 'terrorist', he wrote an emotional letter to him, asking him to give up his 'wayward ways'. The operative part of Motilal's letter read:

'I do not expect you to change your views, however widely they may differ from mine, simply to please me. But I have every right to expect that no one living in my house will so conduct himself as to bring discredit on my house or me. I have no wish to discuss the various propaganda with which the atmosphere at present is thick. Nor is it necessary to enter into the vexed issue whether or not students should be prohibited from taking an active part in the political movements of the day. I have only to deal with one student and I know that his taking such a part is neither good for himself nor for his country…

'Surely you do not imagine that by neglecting your studies and attending political meetings, you will bring about the salvation of India within the next eighteen months? I have offered you a locus penetentii and give you an opportunity to realize the situation… I do not ask you to sacrifice your principles or act contrary to your opinions. I ask you simply to do the first and foremost duty you owe to yourself, your parents, relations, friends and the country at large. Also to arm yourself for the struggle before you engage in it. Now it is for you to take this opportunity or throw it away. I have done my duty.'

The letter was signed 'Yours affectionately, Bhaiji'. (Hutheesingh, Krishna Nehru, *Dear to Behold: An Intimate Portrait of Indira Gandhi,* The Macmillan Company, London, 1969.)

Krishna Hutheesing recalled that Motilal's words did not make an immediate impact on Manzar as he was determined to liberate the country. He rejected Motilal's offer and left Anand Bhavan. However, after several years of armed struggle and living in hiding, he turned up at Motilal's funeral and subsequently turned into a Gandhian, spreading the gospel of non-violence from village to village.

Though Indira's life ended in a violent and tragic death, it was a life well lived. As a young girl of four, Indira was first exposed to politics and the freedom struggle when the police entered Anand Bhavan to arrest Motilal and Jawaharlal Nehru for calling for the boycott of British goods. The trial was held the next day when Indira, sitting on her grandfather's lap, wondered why a lawyer of the stature of Motilal did not defend himself or his son. The Nehrus had refused to recognize the court or its farcical trial. On 6 December 1921, both father and son were sentenced to six months in prison and a fine of five hundred rupees each. The following day, the police raided Anand Bhavan once again to confiscate the silverware and carpets in compensation for the non-payment of the fines imposed on the Nehrus. An agitated little Indira stamped her foot and shouted, 'You cannot take them. They belong to us.'

Indira, who was born with the proverbial silver spoon in her mouth, had witnessed a big change in Anand Bhavan since the autumn of 1920 when the Indian National Congress had accepted Gandhi's policy of non-cooperation, which called for the boycott of titles, government owned and aided colleges and schools, law courts, legislatures and foreign goods. Motilal had abandoned his lucrative legal practice. The loss in earnings resulted in a reduction of the domestic staff at Anand Bhavan, down from more than fifty to just about a dozen loyalists. The Spode china and Venetian glass, the stock of choice wines, the prized horses and dogs that Mubarak Ali looked after, were all sold. Swaroop Rani and Kamla sold their huge collection of rings, earrings, necklaces, bracelets and brooches of gold studded with diamonds, emeralds, rubies and pearls.

The political atmosphere in Anand Bhavan and the frequent arrests of Motilal, Jawaharlal, Kamla and other members of her family made Indira a different sort of child. In her book, *Dear to Behold*, her aunt, Krishna, who was ten years older than her, recalled how the young girl grew up almost alone and kept herself busy by acting out bits of political theatre, using her dolls for the dramatic scenes. Indira apparently arranged them in a procession, faced by tin policemen with lathis and tin soldiers with guns.

'She often lectured the assemblage, for she had seen Gandhiji, her grandfather and father in that role. Calling upon her satyagrahis (protestors) to march forward and keep the Congress flag high, she asked them not to fear the might of the British government. From the high walls of Anand Bhavan, she had watched similar processions of Congress volunteers in white khadi, carrying the Congress flag aloft.'

Krishna described a scene from when Indira was less than ten years old: 'She was muttering something, so I went up to her and asked, "What in the world are you trying to do?"

‘She (Indira) looked at me solemnly with her round little face ringed by jet black hair and her dark eyes burning, and said, “I am practising being Joan of Arc. I have just been reading about her and some day, I am going to lead my people to freedom just as Joan of Arc did.”’

As the freedom movement gained strength, a somewhat restless Indira first showed her political colours. She was too young to join the Youth League (which later became the Indian Youth Congress), so she came up with the idea of rallying children under the Vanar Sena (Monkey Army). The Vanar Sena met regularly on the back lawns of Anand Bhavan. Hundreds of children in Allahabad joined Indira’s army, which acted as a bridge between them and the adults. They worked as an auxiliary of the Congress and their charter of duties included making flags, addressing envelopes, serving water to party-men in the processions and pasting meeting notices. It often worked as an underground organization. The children were too young to be arrested, and they successfully alerted many freedom fighters whenever a police party came raiding.

Indira had cherished memories of the achievements of the Vanar Sena:

‘Nobody (among the British authorities) bothered about an urchin hopping in and out of police lines. Nobody thought that he could be doing anything. Well, the boy would memorize the message and go to the people concerned and say, “You know what has to be done, or not done. All the police is there. So and so is going to be arrested” or whatever the news was.

‘In a similar way, we also acted as an intelligence group, because frequently, the policemen sitting in front of a police station would talk about what was going on – who was to be arrested and where there would be a raid, and so on. Four or five children playing hopscotch outside would attract no one’s attention. And they would deliver the news to the people in the movement.’ (Pande, B.N., *Indira Gandhi,* Government of India, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, New Delhi, 1989.)

Both Jawaharlal and Motilal Nehru took an active interest in the Vanar Sena and its activities. Motilal’s letters from prison often made suggestions. In one such letter addressed to Indira, Motilal wrote:

‘What is your position in the Monkey Army? I suggest the wearing of a tail by every member, the length of which should be in proportion to the rank of the wearer. The badge with a print of Hanuman is right, but see that the *gada* (mace), which is usually in Hanuman’s hands, is not there. Remember the *gada* means violence and we are a non-violent army. Practise running. Papu (Jawaharlal) runs two miles every morning without stopping. You ought to be able to run at least

one mile without stopping and gradually increase the distance. In this way, you will soon be able to run a mile without getting tired or losing breath.' (Hutheesingh, Krishna Nehru, *Dear to Behold: An Intimate Portrait of Indira Gandhi,* The Macmillan Company, London, 1969.)

In 1938, Indira finally joined the Indian National Congress, as she had always longed to do. Soon afterwards, in 1942, she married journalist Feroze Gandhi. Shortly after the couple wed they were sent to the Naini Central Jail in Allahabad on charges of subversion by the British. Indira's first and only imprisonment lasted from 11 September 1942 until 13 May 1943.

In November 1946, Feroze became managing editor of *National Herald*, a newspaper founded by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1937. The job required him to stay in Lucknow so he took a small house there and furnished it with great care. He designed his own furniture and planted more than a dozen rose bushes in the garden. Indira busied herself with housekeeping and local Congress activities. They shared a deep bond of love and affection. The couple was much sought after in Lucknow's social and political circles, but both Indira and Feroze avoided the limelight.

Indira and Feroze had two sons, Rajiv and Sanjay. Both grew up with inquisitive minds and a keen interest in mechanical toys and gadgets. This trait was ignited in them to a great extent by Feroze, who enjoyed gathering 'know-how' about anything he came across. With the passage of time, both Rajiv and Sanjay got involved in the domain of mechanics. Whether it was cars, planes or any other type of engine, it invariably aroused their curiosity.

Feroze, a devoted parent, constructed toys for his sons and encouraged them to find out for themselves how machines worked and how to take things apart and then put them back again. He wanted both Rajiv and Sanjay to become engineers.

As prime minister, Nehru had his official residence at 17 York Road in New Delhi, which, in addition to his own suite, had a large drawing room, three bedrooms for members of his family and working quarters for his staff. In the process of helping Jawaharlal manage his household, Indira frequently shuttled between Lucknow and Delhi. As Nehru's burden of work increased, it became essential for Indira to stay in Delhi, act as his hostess, manage his residence and look after him. Nehru's sister, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, was away abroad as an Indian envoy, while his other sister, Krishna, was in Mumbai with her husband and children.

Feroze realized Indira's predicament and her inner conflict between running her own house in Lucknow and her duty towards her

father. He suggested to her that instead of her travelling five hundred kilometres every weekend by the overnight Lucknow Mail, he would make frequent visits to Delhi.

While Indira avoided assuming a political role, she acted as a watchdog to keep political opportunists out. She was careful about not letting her political and social work affect her bond with her children. Mohammad Yunus recalled in his memoirs how Indira took care to spend quality time with the two boys and directed their activities closely. (Yunus, Mohammad, *Persons, Passions, Politics*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1980.)

A society lady notorious for her interminable card sessions once asked Indira whether she ever found time to be with her children. Sanjay, who was barely eight, heard this and, before Indira could respond, shot back, 'Mummy spends more time with us than you do with your son. He hardly sees you because you are playing cards the whole day.'

Indira was a tender mother. Perhaps she was mindful of her own loneliness as a child so she personally supervised Rajiv and Sanjay's meals, played with them and took them for films that were suitable for children. They had a Danish governess, Anna, who had been secretary to scientist Jagdish Chandra Bose. Anna was a strict disciplinarian who believed in giving Rajiv and Sanjay cold showers, sunbaths, exercise and a diet consisting essentially of vegetables and yoghurt.

The partition of India brought pain and agony to all. Indira who had remained anaemic after Sanjay's birth was not too well, but quickly swung into action. After making arrangements for the care of her children, she began visiting the refugee camps. Each time news of fresh violence against the Hindus came from the newly-created Pakistan, a new wave of violence broke out against the Muslims in Delhi. In one instance, an unruly mob surrounded the house of a poor Muslim, threatening to kill everyone inside. When Indira came to know of it, she rushed to the spot. She heard the mob shouting and abusing the family cowering inside, but remained unfazed and entered inside.

Recalling the event, Indira's aunt (Hutheesingh, Krishna Nehru, *Dear to Behold: An Intimate Portrait of Indira Gandhi,* The Macmillan Company, London, 1969.) wrote:

'She told them not to be afraid and to follow her. While the angry Hindus hurled insults at her (somehow they did not dare to stop her), she got the whole Muslim family into her Jeep and took them to her father's house.'

When the 1952 general elections were announced, the Uttar

Pradesh Congress unit asked her to contest the Lok Sabha polls, but she declined, saying that her priorities at the time were Rajiv and Sanjay.

Years later, Indira's granddaughter, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, too, would show a similar sense of priority in putting her children first, opting to look after them over joining active politics. In fact, during 1998–2010, Priyanka's image has continued to figure on countless Congress billboards, in some cases next to that of her mother and grandmother, Indira Gandhi, to whom she bears an uncanny resemblance. But Priyanka has ruled herself out of the political race for now, saying, 'I have small children and I need to spend time with them, which is my priority.' Priyanka acted as a 'star campaigner' in both the 2004 and 2009 general elections, but confined herself to playing the role of election manager for her mother in the Raibareli constituency and for her brother, Rahul Gandhi, in Amethi.

In the early 1950s, Indira was associated with the Indian Council of Child Welfare and the Central Social Welfare Board and with the development of Indian music, dance and films.

Jawaharlal Nehru was extremely fond of his two grandsons. In June 1950, Nehru took the young Sanjay and Rajiv to Indonesia at the invitation of President Sukarno. The sailor-suit clad boys enjoyed their first sea voyage, aboard *INS Delhi*. It turned out to be a marvellous trip on which Nehru was able to unwind totally, playing deck games with his grandsons.

On the national front, this period saw Nehru in regular conflict with the Congress organization on key issues. During the freedom struggle, the Congress had been a loosely fashioned organization, the focus of which had been to lead the independence struggle against the British Raj. In other words, the only unifying link was the national will to fight for freedom. Once the Congress formed the national government, the communist, socialist and conservative components within the party began voicing their opinion. Nehru's Fabian socialist ideas on economic and social issues came in conflict with several powerful lobbies and vested interests within the Congress.

These intra-party conflicts led to the resignation of two presidents of the AICC, forcing Nehru to function as party head between 1951 and 1954 in addition to his prime ministerial responsibilities. By 1958, the Congress was losing its importance as a mass organization and party in the legislatures among the elected members of the legislative assemblies (MLAs) and Parliament (MPs), who gained an upper hand in laying down policies and programmes.

In 1959, leftist elements within the Congress formed a 'ginger group', pressing for the implementation of Nehru's socialist ideas, but

the rightists prevented it. In February 1959, Indira became the Congress president much to the surprise of many in the party. Nehru's detractors quickly pointed at the prime minister's bid to push his daughter into the coveted post, but a large section of the party leaders of that era felt that Indira had earned her post through merit. She was the fourth woman to head the party and quickly proved her ability in tackling the Kerala crisis and recommending the creation of Maharashtra and Gujarat to end the linguistic troubles there. When Indira's one-year term came to an end in February 1960, the CWC tried to persuade her to stand for re-election, but Indira declined firmly, paving the way for K. Kamaraj to be elected president.

After the Chinese invasion, Nehru's health deteriorated, leading to constant speculation about 'After Nehru, who?' A political commentator of the time described Nehru as a 'banyan tree' under whose shadow nothing grew, referring to the absence of any political personality in Nehru's grand mould who enjoyed acceptability across the country.

The ailing Nehru always remained dismissive of the issue of his successor. Each time he was asked to nominate someone, he replied that in a democratic system, the people would make the choice. Asked if he was grooming Indira as his successor, Nehru told an interviewer:

'I am certainly not grooming her for anything of that sort. That does not mean she should not be called to occupy a position of responsibility after me. It is well known that I did not groom her or help her in any way to become the Congress president (in 1959), but she did, and I am told by people who do not like my policies or me that she made a very good president. Sometimes she chooses a line of her own against my way of thinking, which was the right thing to do, but what I want to point out is the fact that I did not choose or groom her for that high post. The Congress did so… In fact, for some time, I was mentally opposed to the idea, but she was chosen and we worked more like normal political colleagues than a father-daughter combination. We agreed on some things. We differed on others.' (Abbas K.A., *That Woman: Indira Gandhi's Seven Years in Power,* Indian Books Company, New Delhi, 1973.)

Till his death on 27 May 1964, Nehru insisted that he was opposed to a dynastic arrangement, saying it was undemocratic and undesirable.

On the day of Nehru's death, the cabinet appointed the senior-most minister, Gulzari Lal Nanda, as acting prime minister. The CWC authorized party chief Kamaraj to make a recommendation for Nehru's successor. Kamaraj picked Lal Bahadur Shastri over Morarji Desai. Within a week, Shastri was elected unanimously by the

Congress MPs and sworn in as prime minister.

Shastri wanted Indira to take charge of the foreign ministry, but she declined. The prime minister insisted, arguing that as Nehru's daughter, her presence in the Union cabinet would lend it prestige and help him carry out his responsibilities. Finally, she yielded, agreeing to become the minister for information and broadcasting.

War with Pakistan broke out in 1965. Indira was the first cabinet minister to go to the battlefront. She visited the Indian troops in the field and in frontline hospitals. Finally, when the war was halted in September 1965, Shastri and the Pakistani leadership were invited to Tashkent in January 1966 to sign a peace treaty. Hours after signing the pact, Shastri had a heart attack and died.

Under the Indian Constitution, the majority party in Parliament elects the prime minister. The Congress, which had a majority in the Lok Sabha, was supposed to pick the leader, but the MPs sought the views of the CWC and Kamaraj. Indira made no move on her own, but the CWC was divided. There were several claimants led by Morarji Desai, the then defence minister, Y.B. Chavan, Jagjivan Ram and S.K. Patil, the Congress boss of Bombay and a leading light of the 'syndicate' that controlled the party governments in nine states. The CWC was anxious about the party's future and wanted someone popular with a pan-Indian identity to lead them to victory in the elections.

Once again, Kamaraj acted as kingmaker, sounding Indira out for the coveted post. Indira said she would do whatever her party chief directed her to do. In other words, Indira was ready if the majority of the party MPs were in her favour. Desai refused to accept her. A contest was announced on 19 January 1966, nine days after Shastri expired.

Indira got up early that day and visited Rajghat, Mahatma Gandhi's final resting place on the banks of the Yamuna in Delhi. She stood alone before Gandhi's samadhi. Her next destination was Shantivan, where Nehru had been cremated. As she stood in silence, Indira thought of a letter Nehru had written to her from prison on her thirteenth birthday:

'Be brave, and all the rest follows. If you are brave, you will not fear and will not do anything of which you are ashamed… let us make friends with the sun and work in the light and do nothing secretly and furtively… and if you do so, my dear, you will grow up a child of the light, unafraid and serene and unruffled, whatever may happen.' (Abbas K.A., *That Woman: Indira Gandhi's Seven Years in Power,* Indian Books Company, New Delhi, 1973.)

At 3 p.m., the presiding officer handed over the result to Kamaraj in the central hall of Parliament. Kamaraj spoke in chaste Tamil,

announcing the winner. Few MPs and AICC office-bearers could understand what the Congress chief said. The suspense did not last long as someone shouted in excitement: 'Indira 355, Desai 169'.

As Indira made her way to the dais, dressed in a plain white khadi sari, with a fawn coloured Kashmiri shawl around her shoulders and holding a single red rose, she greeted a grim and sulking Desai with the words, 'Will you bless me in the tasks that I have ahead, Morarjibhai?' According to those who were present there, a stone-faced Desai replied, 'I give you my blessings.'

A couple of years later, Indira was asked if being a woman prime minister was an asset or a handicap in politics. She replied:

'I do not think my being a woman makes any difference at all. It is a question of putting people in compartments. If you say that this job is only for a man, that man has certain qualities and capabilities that a woman does not have, then what are these qualities? Physical strength? No, if you are looking for weak points, you can find them in anybody, and I do not think a person who is head of state should think in terms of himself or herself as belonging to any group – whether it is sex, religion or caste. If the people accept you as a leader of the nation, that is all that matters.' (Abbas K.A., *That Woman: Indira Gandhi's Seven Years in Power,* Indian Books Company, New Delhi, 1973.)

Indira rose in stature and many of the Congress old guard who had thought of manipulating her to their advantage were in for a shock. Kamaraj, who had played a role in shaping Indira's career was disappointed when he realized that Indira had a mind of her own and an independent style of functioning. At one juncture, he was heard describing her rather ruefully as 'a big man's daughter, a little man's mistake', the 'little man' reference being to him.

The success of the bank nationalization and Privy Purse abolition was followed by India's victory in the 1971 war, which led to the creation of an independent Bangladesh. Indira was a prime minister committed to war. Unlike Nehru, Indira was not reluctant to fight or get aggressive when her military generals urged her to open the Western front, forcing the Pakistan army onto the backfoot. On 3 December 1971, a formal war was declared, and on that same day, Bangladesh was recognized as a country. Indira became a folk heroine in Bangladesh and the rest of the world.

On the homefront, however, trouble was brewing. In 1969, Sanjay was twenty-three years old. He had been trained at the Rolls Royce factory in Crewe in the UK. Though he did not complete the course, Sanjay

was one of several applicants to seek a licence to manufacture a small and cheap car in India. In 1970, he was the lone applicant to be granted the licence. Indira was charged with nepotism. She made little effort to deny the charge. Each time the matter was raised in Parliament, Indira would purse her lips and shrug off the criticism. There was more to follow. The Haryana government, under Bansi Lal, handed over three hundred acres of land for Sanjay's Maruti factory; some 15,000 farmers were evicted to free the land. P.N. Haksar, who was principal secretary to Indira till 1973, was dropped from his post for opposing the Maruti project.

This period also saw the emergence of Jayaprakash Narayan, a freedom fighter who was living quietly in Bihar till then. JP, as he was popularly called, was a young man in 1921 when Jawaharlal Nehru and Abul Kalam Azad first singled him out. To keep him away from the freedom struggle, JP's family had packed him off to the US, where he had spent seven years in various colleges. But JP could not resist joining the Congress and the freedom movement. In 1930, he met Nehru and joined the party.

After spending a considerable amount of time in various prisons, JP was finally released in 1946, but soon after Independence, he developed differences with Nehru and joined the Congress Socialist Party which was also known as the Socialist Party (India) or Praja Socialist Party.

In 1973, JP wrote to several MPs seeking to protect individual rights and democratic values. He formed a body called Citizens for Democracy and became a sort of patriarch for all disgruntled elements. His followers multiplied quickly in number. Sanjay Gandhi became a favourite target of many, including those with vested interests.

Some publications hostile to Indira and the Congress published exaggerated stories about Sanjay, dubbing him a 'monster'. Sanjay and his supporters launched a counter-offensive, which hurt mainstream and independent media. Sanjay kept alleging conspiracy theories against him, saying, 'How long can I leave it to Mummy to defend me? I want to answer these charges myself.'

On 23 December 1976, Indira told Congress volunteers at the conclusion of a training camp:

'In fact, I think, Sanjay would never have come to politics if there had not been a tremendous attack on him in Parliament even before the Emergency, because he was not basically interested in any of these things. But when there was that attack, he did feel that nobody was speaking for him. This is what urged him to come out. The greater the attack on him, the greater his determination to do what he could. One thing he inherits from me is that when we are under attack, we fight

back. I can say this because I know his psychology, his nature and my own nature.'

Family retainer Yunus, who had loaned his house to Indira after the 1977 electoral debacle, also felt that Sanjay had been treated unfairly: 'He was accused of every conceivable vice and mischief and held responsible for anything and everything going wrong. Once I heard the wife of a leading industrialist telling others about his (Sanjay's) activities in a Delhi hotel. When I questioned her about the authenticity of the tale, she had the audacity to tell me, "I know it for certain. The whole of Delhi knows it. He is always found in Oberoi Intercontinental." I told her that the management of that very hotel was keen to see him enter its premises even once for them to brag about his patronage.' (Yunus, Mohammad, *Persons, Passions, Politics*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1980).

Yunus, a Pakhtun, had been a close associate of Indira's father, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India. And he had maintained his links with Indira and her sons, Sanjay and Rajiv Gandhi. In fact, Sanjay and Maneka Gandhi were married at 12 Wellingdon Crescent when Yunus was still living there. Yunus's son Adil Shaharyar was a close friend of Rajiv, Sanjay, Amitabh Bachchan, Amitabh's brother Ajitabh and actor Kabir Bedi. Yunus was privy to many tales of the Nehru–Gandhi family. For years, he served as the unofficial spokesman of India's first family, who remained reticent on most personal matters.

Starting off as a freedom fighter, Yunus had been inducted into the Indian Foreign Service by Nehru in 1947. He served as the Indian ambassador to many countries, including Turkey, Indonesia, Iraq and Spain, and was a close friend of Frontier Gandhi Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. After his last official posting as secretary to the ministry of commerce, Yunus acted as a special envoy for Indira. He served as the administrator of the Indian Trade Fair Authority and chairman of the *National Herald* group of newspapers. In 1989, he was nominated to the Rajya Sabha, courtesy Rajiv Gandhi.

Yunus, who had enjoyed the proximity of almost all the members of the Nehru–Gandhi family, including Sonia and Maneka, insisted in his book, that Sanjay had led a clean and spartan life. He was austere in his habits and wore kurta-pyjamas and ordinary chappals. He ate whatever was served to him at home or by friends. A teetotaller by choice, he avoided drinking even tea, coffee and soft drinks.

According to him, Sanjay was what he was because of his mother. Indira had brought up both Rajiv and him with a combination of love and discipline. According to Maneka, Sanjay was not able to use 'bad language' beyond 'stupid' or 'silly'. Maneka, on the other hand, was

used to brash and informal dealings. When Sanjay and Maneka were married in September 1974, there were some initial hiccups, which Yunus had helped to sort out. At the time of Sanjay and Maneka's wedding, the bride's parents were staying at Greater Kailash, New Delhi, and had an old, rickety car. Yunus volunteered to host the wedding at 12 Willingdon Crescent. Due to an austerity drive, the government had abandoned the annual whitewash of all residential accommodation. Yunus decided to get the exteriors of 12 Willingdon Crescent whitewashed for the marriage at his own cost. He also arranged for floodlights, floral decorations and the dinner that was held the following night and paid for it all.

Author and filmmaker Khwaja Ahmad Abbas was also close to the Nehru–Gandhi family. Abbas, a diehard admirer of Nehru and Indira, was, however, deeply disappointed with Sanjay and described him as a spoilt, pampered child who had imbibed some wrong and 'objectionable' (free market) ideas. Abbas gives a detailed account of Sanjay in his book, *20th March 1977 – A Day Like Any Other Day*. 20 March was significant because that was the day Indira and the Congress lost power for the first time ever since Independence.

In a chapter titled 'The Sanjay Gandhi Story', Abbas has claimed that during Sanjay's car manufacturing days, the then finance minister, C. Subramaniam, had advised him to seek advice from a noted industrial house which had ample experience in car manufacturing. The industrialist's influence on Sanjay became apparent not so much in his car project as in his economic thinking.

In an interview to *Surge* magazine, Sanjay not only contradicted some key Nehruvian ideas, but even questioned some of Indira's progressive policies. The voice of big business in Sanjay's interview is said to have greatly upset Indira.

In one particular response, Sanjay was quoted as saying:

'I think the public sector should function only in competition with the private sector… where it cannot function in competition with the private sector, it should be allowed to die a natural death. Most of the private sector people… like Tatas, do not own Tatas and Birlas do not own Birlas. But the units have their names, they get these profits and they are happy, so it's okay.' (Vasudev, Uma, *Two Faces of Indira Gandhi*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi 1977.)

Indira had to work hard to persuade Sanjay to retract another statement in which he had made some wild allegations against the communist leadership. Two months later, the Allahabad High Court held her accountable for electoral malpractices. Her private assistant, the burly Yashpal Kapoor, was caught acting as her electoral agent, even though his resignation from government service was yet to be

accepted. Indira refused to step down, which stunned the nation. The prime minister of the country was not a law-abiding citizen, it found.

Indira's well-wishers, like Abbas, were upset and dismayed by her refusal to step down. Abbas claimed that it was 'certain elements' within the Congress, including Sanjay, who had forced Indira to change her mind and 'fight it out' in defiance of the law. Indira was told that the 'adverse' court ruling had annoyed the poorer sections of society. The prime minister was, however, unaware that her own house was being used to send out posters and propaganda to show that the masses were supporting Indira's continuation, in spite of the adverse court verdict.

Another Indira supporter, Subhadra Joshi, known for probity in public life, said she was scandalized to know that the prime minister's residence was being used for self-publicity. Dressed in white khadi, the diminutive Subhadra confronted the young boys busy transporting posters and asked them who had ordered this be done. 'Sanjayji,' they replied.

Subhadra, who had the distinction of defeating Atal Bihari Vajpayee electorally in 1962 at Balrampur, was full of moral courage, having worked closely with Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru. She telephoned Sanjay and told him such activities should not be carried out from the prime minister's residence. To her horror, on the following day, 13 June 1975, Subhadra learnt that electricity, water and bus services in Delhi had been suspended to express solidarity with Indira. This was in a month when the temperature rises to forty-six degrees Celsius and above in Delhi.

Subhadra did not wait to take an appointment with Indira. But on meeting her she was shocked to find that the prime minister was not unduly upset by the suffering of the people. An argument took place, but to Indira's credit, she listened patiently and eventually agreed with Subhadra that the proposed form of protest should be withdrawn.

Indira was aware of the stuff of which Subhadra was made. After she married her husband B.D. Sharma, Subhadra and he had observed the vow of *brahmachar* (celibacy) throughout their lives in order to better serve the nation and fight communalism.

During the 1947 communal disturbances, Subhadra fell ill and was hospitalized at Kingsway Hospital in Delhi. But when she learnt about the violence, she quietly left the hospital in a tonga to stop it. When she returned to the hospital, the doctor attending her was angry with her and had resolved to forcibly discharge her. But when he learnt that she was a follower of Mahatma Gandhi and that Gandhi was coming to visit her in the hospital, he relented. When Gandhi

arrived, he asked Subhadra how many innocent lives had been lost in Delhi due to the communal violence. When Subhadra speculated that the figure could be more than a thousand, Gandhi asked if it included some peace-workers too.

Subhadra recalled that Mahatma Gandhi had been dismayed to hear her reply 'none' and he wondered how he could believe that she and the other peace-workers had tried to save innocent lives. 'When I argued that we tried to stop the violence, but the police just did not listen, Gandhiji retorted: "What is this I am hearing! You faced the Britishers' bullets and now you say you cannot manage your own police?"'

Subhadra's electoral victory against Vajpayee had impressed Indira deeply. More than the victory, it was the courage of her convictions that moved Indira. In his election speeches, Vajpayee had reportedly remarked that Subhadra was not a local and that she did not adhere to Hindu culture, pointing to the fact that she wore neither sindoor nor bangles.

Subhadra responded by telling the electorate that she had come to contest the elections and not for 'drama'. She said, 'I will remain as I am. What he is saying is right. No one knows a soldier's religion or caste when he goes to fight for his country… I have come fearlessly, to fight for my country.'

Sanjay's rise to power had resulted in the rise of a small but powerful clique within the Congress that often worked parallel to the functioning of the prime minister, and directly reported to him. At Indira's residence, a special telephone line was installed in Sanjay's room, through which Indira's additional private secretary, R.K. Dhawan, remained constantly in touch with the chief ministers of the Congress ruled states, the police commissioner and the lieutenant-governor of Delhi, and several influential party and government functionaries. The modus operandi was that calls and instructions were issued for and on behalf of Sanjay. On many occasions, Indira was not even aware of her son's growing unconstitutional clout.

Apart from Dhawan, Sanjay had gathered several other fair-weather friends around him. These included Haryana's Bansi Lal, Madhya Pradesh's Vidya Charan Shukla, Ambika Soni, who was picked by Indira from Rome, and socialite Rukhsana Sultana. While Ambika and Rukhsana were constantly at loggerheads with each other, the others in the group worked as a cohesive team to further their own personal ambitions.

On 20 June 1975, Sonia Gandhi had her first brush with politics when

Sanjay convinced the entire family to attend a rally at Delhi's Ramlila Ground and show solidarity with Indira. Even young Rahul and Priyanka were to be in attendance. Dhawan ensured that every Congress chief minister sent as many truckloads of people as he could. Bansi Lal was most enthusiastic and made full use of the resources. Sonia and Rajiv felt awkward, but Sanjay kept asking them to wave their hands and 'enjoy the moment'. Sanjay's wife, Maneka, loved the rally and kept telling Indira about the surging crowds and Sanjay's organizational abilities.

Indira, an astute politician by then, was taken in by the 'sea of faces'. She saw a mini India admiring and idolizing her. Little did she realize that most of the crowd had been hired and was not even aware of the issue for which they had been brought there. Indira spoke about her family's contribution and all the good work that the Congress regime was doing.

The rally was not telecast on the state-run Doordarshan. The then information and broadcasting minister, Inder Kumar Gujral, who was schooled in Nehruvian philosophy, had vetoed it on the grounds that the rally was a party event, not a government rally, and did not need coverage. In retaliation, Sanjay and his team convinced Indira to pack Gujral off to Moscow as Indian ambassador. V.C. Shukla was brought in instead.

Disturbed by Sanjay Gandhi's blatant interference in government matters, civic unrest was increasing every day and, five days later, the entire opposition showed its strength at the same venue. Jayaprakash Narayan appealed to the police and armed forces to 'disobey' any illegal orders of which their conscience did not approve.

Promptly, the following morning, a cabinet meeting was called. Instead of the established practice of discussion and consultation, Indira's colleagues were summarily informed that a state of Emergency was being imposed under Article 352 of the Indian Constitution. The Emergency effectively bestowed upon Indira the power to rule by decree, suspending elections and civil liberties.

Indira's colleagues kept mum, perhaps recalling that discretion was the better part of valour. Only defence minister Sardar Swaran Singh made a feeble attempt to ask if such a drastic action was necessary. Minutes later, Indira was heard announcing on All India Radio the merits of the Emergency and Swaran Singh found himself replaced by Bansi Lal.

A declaration of Emergency was not unusual in developing countries like India. Even in the UK, the Edward Heath government had called for it five times in the four years of its existence. In Australia, the governor-general had dismissed the prime minister in

1975 and called for fresh polls. In India, too, there had been a declaration of 'external' emergency during the 1962 and 1971 wars. But in the summer of 1975, there was nothing urgent enough to necessitate the calling of an Emergency. The political scientists and scholars of that era felt that if individual states such as Bihar had some problems, a presidential decree would have sufficed.

Later, in 1978, the Shah Commission, which was convened to inquire specifically into the Emergency and its excesses, found that there had been no evidence of a threat to the Constitution or law and order in the country that had warranted the declaration of an Emergency.

For Bansi Lal, the office of the defence minister was the highest that the small-time lawyer from Golagarh, Bhiwani, in Haryana achieved during his long career that saw him become the chief minister of Haryana four times.

The son of a Jat farmer, Bansi used to walk barefoot for many miles to go to school each day. He rose to become a lawyer in the court of the nawab of Loharu, but gave up his legal practice to become a bus conductor. His detractors said his skill in using foul language was acquired during his tenure as a bus conductor and was embellished during his long years of sycophancy and furthering his personal interests during his time in the nawab's court.

Bansi Lal became the chief minister of Haryana for the fourth time in 1996, when he floated the Haryana Vikas Party. He won on the plank of prohibition. One of the first orders passed by him on assuming the top post was introducing prohibition in the state. Ironically, he paid the price for prohibition – the Haryana Vikas Party was able to win just two seats in the 2000 assembly elections when the Congress, with Sonia at its helm, was his ally.

Bansi's humiliating defeat in 2000 saw his opponents once again singing an old limerick that used to do the rounds in the 1950s, when he had just entered politics.

It went:

'Bhiwani mein the ek phateechar vakil,
Na qanoon jaane na jaane daleel;
Woh karte the jo bhi vakalat ki baatein,
Woh hoti thi sab jehalat ki baatein.
Jo boya tha so hi kaata, ab to hai bas ek sawaal,
Kahan gaye woh Bansi Lal?

(In Bhiwani, there was a shoddy lawyer, who knew neither law

nor legal arguments. Whatever talk of law and legal arguments he made, were signs of his ignorance of law. As he sowed, so did he reap. Now there is only one question, where is that fellow Bansi Lal?)'

However, Bansi Lal did display some flashes of brilliance during his chequered career. He was responsible for electrifying all of Haryana's villages during his tenure as chief minister in the late 1960s and 1970s. He was also seen as a pioneer of highway tourism in the state – a model adopted later by a number of other states.

With friends like Bansi Lal, Sanjay found the ballast for his ride up, but found himself overloaded as he came down.

For those in the Congress, Sanjay's five-point programme emphasized five things: People should have planned families; slums should be cleared and people in slums rehoused; literacy; tree plantation; and women's rights. As ideas, these were all good, but Sanjay and his men tried to implement them forcibly. The young man had no experience. Sanjay's biggest drawback was that each time he realized he had made a blunder, he chose to turn it into a bigger disaster.

Freedom fighter and noted industrialist Ramkrishna Bajaj, too, found himself at the receiving end of Sanjay's ambitions. The Gandhian who loved to describe himself as 'Gandhi's coolie' was constantly harassed throughout the twenty-one-month-long Emergency, during which Sanjay and his team, consisting of Shukla, Om Mehta and Ambika Soni, tried to wrest control of the Vishwa Yuvak Kendra, an apolitical youth training and development centre in the heart of Delhi. Ramkrishna faced massive income tax raids and was forced to prevail upon fellow Gandhian Vinoba Bhave to call off his fast-unto-death fast to prevent cow slaughter.

Ramkrishna, never a man to take quick offence, sought help from Indira, with whom he had enjoyed a childhood friendship, and from Mohammad Yunus, but the harassment did not end. Ramkrishna realized slowly that his harassment was a deliberate policy to browbeat the Bajajs into submission.

On 30 August 1975, Ramkrishna, who was a director of the Vishwa Yuvak Kendra, received a requisitioned order from the Delhi administration seeking to take possession of the Kendra. Ramkrishna checked with his friends in the Congress about why the government was trying to take control of the Kendra. He learnt that Sanjay wanted the Kendra building – which had a well-furnished hostel – for the Youth Congress. A lengthy communication with the then Union home minister Brahmanand Reddy followed, but his plea fell on deaf ears. Shukla advised Ramkrishna to resign as a Kendra trustee and hand over the trust to Sanjay. The Gandhian then took up the matter with Indira, who spent six hours with him while visiting Wardha to see the

ailing Vinoba Bhave. Aboard the plane, Ramkrishna asked her in Hindi,

'*Aapki mujhse koi naraazgi hai kya* (Are you angry with me about something)?'

To which she replied, '*Haan, shikayatein to hoti hi rehti hain* (Yes, there are always some complaints).' The industrialist tried to draw Indira's attention towards the Kendra, but the prime minister chose not to respond.

Later, deposing before the Shah Commission, which had gone into the specifics of the Emergency, Ramkrishna recalled that in a 'friendly' way, Mohammad Yunus had pointed out to him that the government of the day had wide powers, which could be used.

Even as the Kendra issue failed to find resolution, on 18 May 1976, income tax officers raided a hundred and fourteen residential and business establishments across the country. Some eleven hundred officers raided factories and residences in Mumbai, Pune, Bangalore, Chennai, Kanpur, Kolkata and elsewhere. The income tax officers did not spare even Ramkrishna's eighty-four-year-old mother Jankidevi, who had lead a secluded and spartan life, having renounced all her worldly possessions since the demise of her husband Jamunalal in 1942.

Ramkrishna later learnt that his close association with Viren Shah (who later became the governor of West Bengal under the rule of the Bharatiya Janata Party led National Democratic Alliance) and his politician brother Kamalnayan's move to leave Indira in 1966 were held against him.

By way of extending an olive branch, Ramkrishna was asked to persuade Vinoba Bhave to desist from going on a fast against cow slaughter. Indira was very keen to get the Gandhian's endorsement of the Emergency, something that the apolitical Bhave had kept avoiding. In the initial days of the Emergency, he was persuaded to describe it as an '*anushasan parva*' (time for discipline), but most of his supporters and followers had joined the JP movement.

Sanjay's point man, Om Mehta, who was minister of state for home, but effectively running the entire ministry, conveyed to Ramkrishna that the income tax raids could be halted if pressure was applied on the fasting Vinoba Bhave. Ramkrishna was stunned. He told Mehta, 'Why don't you come with me one day to meet Vinobaji? Then only will you know what a great person he is. He is not only my guru, but the guru of my father, too. I am too small a man to question his judgement, leave alone persuade him to do something.' (Kamath M.V., *Gandhi's Coolie: Life and Times of Ramkrishna Bajaj*, Allied Publishers, Ahmedabad, 1988.)

But under duress, Ramkrishna wrote to Vinoba Bhave, expressing

his anguish at the prospect of his revered guru undertaking a fast. The letter, written in Hindi, said:

'As it is, I am a small person. Any disciple naturally feels inhibited in placing his views frankly before his guru. I too feel likewise. You had also told me that revered Kakaji (Jamunalal Bajaj) had taken up *goseva* as his mission during the last few years of his life and now you are fulfilling that unfinished mission to give satisfaction to Jamunalalji's soul. However, so far as I have been able to understand it, Kakaji's inclination was to arouse public opinion by ceaseless efforts, to study and understand the entire issue in a scientific manner, to try to protect the cow by establishing appropriate organizational machinery.

'In the present situation, instead of undertaking the fast, I feel, it would be more advantageous to decide on the basis of practical considerations. It would, therefore, be more worthy to intensify the efforts in that direction so that public opinion can be effectively mobilized.' (Kamath MV, *Gandhi's Coolie: Life and Times of Ramkrishna Bajaj*, Allied Publishers, Ahmedabad, 1988.)

Vinoba agreed not to undertake the fast.

Writer Nayantara Sahgal, Sanjay's aunt, had many skirmishes with the establishment. She suddenly discovered that many newspaper editors were avoiding her. Publishers politely declined to publish her work and a filmmaker who was keen to make a film based on her novel, *This Time of Morning*, vanished into thin air. The filmmaker, who lived abroad, felt that her association with Nayantara would risk her credibility with the ruling clique and spoil her chances of getting direct sanction for television programmes from the information and broadcasting ministry.

Nayantara, whose mother Vijaya Lakshmi had never got along too well with Indira, was an outspoken critic of the Emergency. In December 1975, Nayantara wrote pamphlets against the Indira regime, liberally strewn with anti-fascism quotes from Nehru. Her mother and friends advised her to avoid writing on politics, but Nayantara could not reconcile herself to the ban on creativity. In an article, she focused on the right to dissent, recalling how atrocious punishments had always been dealt out to those who had disobeyed authority:

'I recalled that one could be sentenced to death by poison for teaching the values of the good life, if these were different from what the state taught. One could be burned at the stake, broken on the wheel or condemned to the galleys for declaring, writing or printing "heresies" against the church or the monarch or challenging current theories about the sun, the earth and the stars. From Socrates to

Servetus and beyond, prison, torture or extermination had been ordinary matter of fact punishments for those who disagreed.' (Sahgal, Nayantara, *A Voice for Freedom*, Hind Pocket Books, Delhi, 1977.)

During the Emergency, Nayantara was particularly alarmed by the growing horror of gulags in India, the seemingly real possibility of unnamed, unnumbered, unreported and undefended arrests. By one estimate, the nineteen-month-long Emergency saw more than a 100,000 political activists of all hues behind bars for long periods. When journalist Kuldip Nayar was arrested, both Indira and Sanjay earned adverse publicity at home and abroad.

Nayantara claimed that her telephone was being tapped and her movements closely monitored. While the actual situation was far less severe than the Soviet forced labour and concentration camp system vividly described in Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, for writers and journalists, earning a living during the Emergency was indeed a problem. Nayantara had finished writing *A Situation in New Delhi,* but before it could be published, she was asked to see the chief censor, Harry D'Penha, who advised her to seek the home ministry's approval. Nayantara declined to see Om Mehta.

'I took my manuscript home and forgot about it. It had no importance now next to the sheer sickness I felt when I thought of admired, veteran leaders, some legendary for their contribution to India, in jail, of the thousands with no famous name or background to protect them.' (Sahgal, Nayantara, *A Voice for Freedom*, Hind Pocket Books, New Delhi, 1977.)

Nayantara was not arrested during the Emergency, but on one occasion, her sister was allegedly told by a close Indira associate and the then West Bengal chief minister, Siddhartha Shankar Ray that she could be 'picked up under MISA' at any time.

MISA, or the Maintenance of Internal Security Act, was dreaded by everyone during the Emergency. Former Union railway minister Laloo Prasad Yadav, who had a daughter during that period, named her Misa Bharti after that draconian law.

On another occasion, V.C. Shukla, another key member of Indira's 'kitchen cabinet', told Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit with an ill-concealed sense of satisfaction that Nayantara would not be able to write about politics. Nehru's sister quickly retorted that politics was not the lone subject on which Nayantara was capable of writing.

By the time the Emergency ended, Nayantara was so disillusioned with the Congress and her close relatives that she found the maverick Subramanian Swamy and his right-wing Jan Sangh a worthy alternative. She told Swamy at a gathering, 'People need to know that the Jan Sangh does not have three horns and a tail.'

B.N. Tandon, who served in the prime minister's office during the Emergency, wrote a Samuel Pepys-type account of it, called *PMO Diary II: The Emergency*. On 28 May 1976, Tandon has an entry stating:

'Gopal gave another instance of how the PM can stoop to any level to achieve her political aims. The only family member left of Kamaraj is his aged sister, who is a very poor lady. Malaviyaji had thought that to help her, she could be given an LPG agency. The PM stopped this. The reason is that Kamaraj's sister is still with the Congress (Old) and shows no sign of wanting to defect to Indira's Congress. At any rate, the PM will not easily reconsider this case.' (Tandon, B.N., *PMO Diary*, Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2006.)

There were other bizarre events in the Sanjay saga of the Emergency. In Connaught Place in New Delhi, there is a textile shop called Pandit Brothers, whose eighty-year-old owner was the uncle of P.N. Haksar, Indira's former principal secretary. It is believed that Haksar had suggested to Indira that she dissociate herself from Sanjay's activities. It may have been just a coincidence, but during the Emergency, Haksar's uncle had to spend a day in police custody. The reason? Apparently, the towels and napkins at his shop did not carry individual price tags, though the bundles did.

Indira, however, had a different take on Sanjay. After her defeat of 1977, writer and filmmaker Khwaja Ahmad Abbas sought an appointment with the former prime minister. He quoted specific instances of excesses during the Emergency, ranging from forced sterilizations to violence, but Indira made no attempts to defend herself or Sanjay.

'Sanjay is a very simple, sincere boy,' she said in a voice in which Abbas noticed a tremor; as if she were pleading for her son. 'He does not drink or smoke and does not take tea or coffee.' (Abbas, K.A., *20th March 1977: A Day Like Any Other Day*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1978.) Indira blamed her party's chief ministers, the CWC and the AICC office-bearers for the entire 'Sanjay build-up'.

Apparently as prime minister, Indira had written numerous letters to the chief ministers of the party-ruled states asking them not to accord state receptions for Sanjay, but they continued to do so.

Indira described Sanjay as a 'doer': 'You see, he isn't a thinker. He is a doer. I mean a cent per cent doer. When he wants something done, he gets it done,' she told her biographer, Dom Moraes.

This period saw the introduction of the 42nd Amendment of the Constitution of India, which was enacted in November 1976, when the term of the present Lok Sabha had extended beyond five years. The amendment purported to reduce the power of the Supreme Court and the High Courts to pronounce upon the constitutionality of laws. The

amendment had four major purposes:

i. To exclude the courts entirely from election disputes;
ii. To strengthen the central government vis-à-vis the state governments and empower it further to rule the country as a unitary, not a federal system;
iii. To give maximum protection from judicial challenges to social revolutionary legislation;
iv. To 'trim' the judiciary, so as to 'make it difficult for the court to upset Parliament's policy in regard to many matters.'

It also declared India to be a socialist, secular republic and laid down the duties of Indian citizens to their government. The main author of this infamous amendment was Dev Kant Barooah, who, as Congress president, had immortalized himself by coining the slogan, 'India is Indira, Indira is India'.

A.R. Antulay was another prime mover behind the amendment. When the bill was placed in Parliament, Antulay, a barrister from Lincoln's Inn, outdid Barooah in praising Indira and called for a 'fresh look' at the existing constitutional provisions, among them the five-yearly parliamentary polls. Antulay praised Indira for driving out Congressmen who were not in the Nehruvian mould. Next he was heard saying, 'It has been left to Nehru's proud daughter, the daughter of the Indian nation, the daughter of India, ancient, present and future, to bring into effect what Nehru had visualized.'

Bansi Lal tried to outdo both Barooah and Antulay when he told Indira's cousin, B.K. Nehru: 'Get rid of all this election nonsense… Just make our sister (Indira) president (of India) for life and there is no need to do anything else.'

Once again, Sanjay was seen as the moving spirit behind all this. Ambika Soni, who was then president of the Indian Youth Congress, however, later claimed that she had been opposed to drastic measures such as amending the Constitution; she said that she had believed that switching to a presidential system would alienate the masses.

Maneka Gandhi defended her husband stoutly even after she left Indira's house and joined the right-wing BJP. According to her, the Emergency brought about order and discipline in the country.

'There were no power failures, no strikes or lockouts, citizens went about without the fear of being mugged, robbed or raped, everything was available at reasonable prices, the slums had been cleared, the stench of open sewers abolished and, instead, clean, wholesome and cheap housing complexes raised in the suburbs, the arid desert of sand and rock turned into lush green, parks and woodland. These were only some of things that Sanjay did for his

city.'

To Maneka, Sanjay had always been a caring husband. If she was feeling under the weather, Sanjay would skip Parliament to be with her. Barely three months before his untimely death, when their son Varun Feroze was to be born, Sanjay accompanied her to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) and stayed by her side through the birth.

'The AIIMS doctors later told me that he was the first man to come into the delivery room while his wife was having a baby,' Maneka said. (Gandhi, Maneka, *Sanjay Gandhi,* Vakil, Feffers and Simons Ltd., Mumbai, 1980.)

In public, too, Sanjay's image was somewhat different. Once Maneka had gone to Willingdon Hospital (now known as Dr Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital), having just got her driving licence. While she was parking her car, she brushed it against another, scratching its paint. Instead of leaving the premises quietly, Maneka decided to wait for the owner. The damaged car belonged to an old man who gave Maneka a lecture about driving carefully and the monetary damage that she had caused. Maneka readily offered to pay the necessary compensation, but she was not carrying much money on her, so she wrote her address and gave it to him, asking him to send the bill home to her. When the old man saw her address, he said, 'Are you the wife of Sanjay Gandhi? Then I will not charge you anything.' (Moraes, Dom, *Mrs. Gandhi,* Jonathan Cape, London, 1980.)

Columnist Kumkum Chadha, who covered Sanjay Gandhi during and after the Emergency, recalled how once, after giving a controversial interview in which he criticized the judiciary, Sanjay called her the next day to check if she was in any trouble or needed legal help. Sanjay even sent R.K. Anand, then an upcoming lawyer who later became a Congress MP, to her house to tell her that he was only a phone call away.

Congressmen who worked closely with Sanjay praise him even today. Gufran-e-Azam, who served as an influential Youth Congress leader of that time, recalls that Sanjay was a 'party animal' in the sense that he had few interests outside politics. 'We could go on chatting, discussing individuals and party affairs for hours,' Gufran said, pointing out that the 'cream' of young leadership that emerged during Sanjay's time continues to call the shots in the party even now. 'Ghulam Nabi Azad, Ahmed Patel, Ambika Soni, Kamal Nath, Gundu Rao, Ashok Gehlot, Digvijaya Singh, Jagdish Tytler, Vayalar Ravi and Veer Bahadur Singh are some of the names who were schooled under him.' Gufran said that on numerous occasions, Sanjay would challenge his choice of party nominees and even block-level functionaries. 'In

any argument, his favourite phrase was “convince me”. We were all encouraged to air our views openly and frankly at party forums. It was the old guard that was wary of Sanjay,’ claimed Gufran.

Sanjay made a concerted bid to change the way politics was pursued. Sanjay questioned and troubled the established party leadership and created a parallel order in virtually every state. Even those fiercely loyal to Indira were not spared. Sanjay’s view was that unless the ‘comfort zone’ of these leaders was shaken up, the party would not excel. He experimented with new caste equations. The Nehruvian–Gandhian principles of probity in public life, simplicity, and a thrust on values were given the go-by. Indira watched with detached bemusement and a tinge of sadness, but she made little effort to check Sanjay’s style of functioning.

Sanjay’s close associate and socialite Rukhsana Sultana was one person who managed to annoy everyone from Maneka and Ambika to many of the Congress leaders. Rukhsana was an exotic character, an unabashed exhibitionist, who acted as Sanjay’s point person in Delhi’s Muslim localities. As Youth Congress president, Ambika often shared the platform with Sanjay and heaped praise on him. Rukhsana, too, never missed an opportunity to insist that Sanjay and she were ‘ice-cream buddies’, whatever that meant.

A niece of actress Begum Para and a pin-up girl of the 1950s, Rukhsana had been married to a Sikh, but her marriage did not last long. She had a boutique in Connaught Circus, from where she retailed high-end diamond jewellery on a commission basis. One day, Rukhsana was thrilled to see the prime minister’s son visit her boutique. The lady apparently had the Madame du Barry bug. When they met next, she told Sanjay that she felt highly motivated and inspired by his leadership qualities and offered to dedicate her life to his ‘cause’.

Rukhsana’s ascent was intensely disliked by Maneka, Indira, Ambika and several others, but Sanjay kept pushing her to work in the slums and in the Jama Masjid area, which is dominated by Muslims. Indira was once heard saying, ‘She (Rukhsana) is a very scatterbrained sort of person.’ Maneka said Rukhsana talked a lot of rubbish.

In the Jama Masjid area, the sight of Rukhsana, perfumed, painted and bejewelled to within an inch of her life, wearing pink spectacles, a silk sari and a low-cut choli, was a complete put-off for both men and women. But Rukhsana was not bothered by their reaction. She said her jewellery was part of her personality. ‘Why should I discard my real personality?’ she asked. More often than not, Rukhsana was seen moving about the Jama Masjid area with a handkerchief soaked in eau de cologne over her nose under her famous oversized ‘go-go’ shades.

At one point, Rukhsana was allegedly paid a sum of eighty-four thousand rupees by the Union health and family welfare ministry for 'motivating' eight thousand men to opt for vasectomies. In June 1976, when she was supervising the demolition of many shops in the Turkaman Gate area of the walled part of Delhi, protesters faced police lathis, teargas, batons and, finally, bullets. Several people were killed.

In an interview to journalist-author Promilla Kalhan, Ambika, who was a Youth Congress functionary in Team Sanjay, criticized Rukhsana's activities, saying she could not tolerate her presence at Indira's residence. She recalled that she had tried to warn Indira about Rukhsana and Sanjay, but Indira chose not to take any notice. On a second occasion, Indira told Ambika to talk to Sanjay about it. Sanjay dismissed Ambika's reservations, saying:

'The Youth Congress needs Rukhsana, Rukhsana does not need the Youth Congress.' (Kalhan, Promilla, *Black Wednesday*, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 1977.)

Ambika claimed that she had not been 'invited' to join the Congress by Indira in Rome, when the prime minister visited Italy; she had been forced. Then a homemaker, married to diplomat husband Uday, Ambika Soni would have perhaps been leading a retired life now had Indira not insisted on bringing her to India and appointing her general secretary of the Indian Youth Congress under Priya Ranjan Dasmunshi.

A combination of beauty and brains, Ambika was an instant hit in Delhi. She was young, perky and intelligent. Kumkum Chadha recalls Ambika as one of the very few who would walk abreast Sanjay, rather than just follow him around. In the Youth Congress, she not only shared the dais with Sanjay, but also matched his aggression. If Sanjay was a politician in a hurry to get things done, Ambika rarely faulted on delivery.

Ambika's associate of that era was Janardhan Gehlot, a *kabbadi* enthusiast who had mentored Rajasthan chief minister Ashok Gehlot. As destiny would have it, Janardhan, a much respected and towering Youth Congress leader of the Sanjay era, lost the 2008 assembly polls as a BJP nominee when Ashok Gehlot became chief minister of Rajasthan for the second time.

When author Rani Dube interviewed her soon after Indira's defeat in 1977, Ambika admitted that there was a change in Indira's personality before and during the Emergency. 'The change was a slow one. In the beginning, Mrs Gandhi listened to everything with an open mind, and thought about it, and talked about it, and if she agreed, would do something about it. Then she began to listen, but not do

anything. And in the last few months (of the Emergency), she did not even want to hear anything. So, the change was definitely there, and I am not sure that it was for the better,' she said. (Dube, Rani, edited by Timeri Murari, *The Evil Within*, Quartet Books, London, 1978.)

Towards the end of the Emergency, Bansi Lal and some others suggested that Indira appoint Sanjay the president of the Youth Congress, a post that was then held by Ambika. Indira asked Ambika to resign, but before she could put in her papers the prime minister changed her mind. Ambika was told not to step down under any circumstances. Perhaps, the caucus around Sanjay wanted him to get a position of authority, but Indira developed cold feet about giving him an official post at 10 Janpath.

After the 1977 defeat, Ambika left the Congress when she was blamed for creating a situation that led to the exit of senior Congress leaders Jagjivan Ram, H.N. Bahuguna and Nandini Sathpathy. Closer to the lifting of the Emergency and the call for fresh polls, Sanjay and the Youth Congress began demanding that a hundred Lok Sabha seats be earmarked for the younger members of the Congress. F.M. Khan, Gundu Rao, Mahesh Joshi and Ashok Bhattacharya were some of Sanjay's key men. But on 2 February 1977, the 'J-bomb' dropped: Jagjivan Ram resigned from the Congress, creating utter panic and a huge sense of demoralization in the party. Ambika was summoned by Indira. When she returned to the Youth Congress office, Ambika asked her trusted aide to prepare a draft of her resignation letter.

The real cause of Ambika's exit was a smear campaign by senior Congress leaders including Jagjivan Ram alleging that the Youth Congress was primarily responsible for the party's defeat. The Youth Congress had sought a hundred-odd Lok Sabha tickets and most of its nominees had lost. The Youth Congress of Sanjay era was fiercely loyal to the leadership. When the counting for 1977 Lok Sabha polls was going on in the Tees Hazari Court of Delhi, jubilant Janata Party and Jan Sangh workers coined a slogan to mock the Congress. They shouted, *'Congressi dikhao, sau rupiya pao* (show a Congress man and win Rs 100)'. Some party leaders from the Congress chose to swallow the humiliation but Youth Congress leaders decided to challenge them even though the counting had shown that all the Congress nominees were trailing badly. *'Haan hum hain Congressi lao sau rupiya,'* they shouted back. Of course, no monetary reward was given to them.

Many leading lights left with Ambika, but the Youth Congress managed to survive, thanks to Ram Chandra Rath, Ghulam Nabi Azad and K.V. Panicker. Out of power, these Youth Congress leaders lived a miserable life. There was an acute paucity of funds. There were days, weeks and months that saw Azad, a young Kashmiri from Doda district, surviving on bread and bananas for his meals. Azad had a

room in a South Avenue flat allotted to Rath that he shared with Panicker. The hunger pangs were apparently so intense that they permanently damaged the lining of Azad's stomach. In time, the politician rose to become Union health minister but the best of doctors could not cure his periodic bouts of illness.

Ambika then joined the Congress (S), which had Tarkeshwari Sinha, K.P. Unnikrishnan and Mohammad Yunus Saleem as its key functionaries. Congressmen addressed the breakaway group as the '*sari and dadhi party*' ('sari' to denote Tarkeshwari Sinha and 'dadhi' to denote Yunus Saleem's flowing beard). Apparently Sinha, Saleem and Unnikrishnan took many rare books away from the party office.

Ambika left the Congress, but she never retracted her stand that Indira alone had the guts and ability to lead the nation. After spending several years in insignificant posts and witnessing a series of electoral defeats, Ambika returned to the Congress, but by then both Sanjay and Indira had passed away. Rajiv inducted her into the party, but did not accord her any importance.

Marginalized, Ambika kept her cool. When P.V. Narasimha Rao took over after Rajiv's death, Ambika was inducted into the Mahila Congress as general secretary. In many ways, it was a post lower than where she had started off in 1975, but the experienced politician in her graciously accepted the lower foothold. Rao blew up everything by 1996 and the rustic Sitaram Kesri's short but eventful tenure as Congress chief saw a mass exodus from the party. Well-meaning Congressmen looked up to Rajiv's widow, Sonia, who, after much reluctance, entered politics at the end of 1997.

Sonia's entry into politics brought back the spotlight on to Ambika. In Ambika, Sonia found a trusted aide, someone who could provide a crucial link from the past to the present. Somewhere along the way, female bonding too played its role. Having learnt many lessons from the heady Sanjay era, Ambika kept a low profile. She was given a Rajya Sabha seat in 1998, followed by a room at 24 Akbar Road. As AICC general secretary, Ambika was back in action. She stood tall because she had been groomed by Indira, politician par excellence, at a time when many of her colleagues were nowhere on the scene.

The defeat of Indira in 1977 had pushed Rukhsana into obscurity. Back then, Sanjay, Indira, Rajiv and Sonia had made no effort to renew ties with her. Rukhsana's only other brush with fame was when actor Saif Ali Khan, son of cricketer Mansoor Ali Khan Pataudi and actress Sharmila Tagore, married her daughter Amrita Singh. Saif was barely 21 and Amrita – Dingy to her friends – is said to have met Saif at a party and invited him home, urging him to bring his own bottle of Scotch. Saif came, bottle in hand, and later said, 'I never left.' The

marriage resulted in two children, but Saif and Amrita were divorced several years later. By then, Saif was a major star in Hindi films.

Sanjay rarely visited 24 Akbar Road or 10 Janpath, which housed the office of the Indian Youth Congress. Yet, each day at Willingdon Crescent and later at 1 Safdarjung Road, he would be given full details of the party leaders visiting the office, their interactions and other deliberations. 'There were too many flies on the wall. Any discussion or conversation involving three or more persons reached Sanjay,' said an AICC office-bearer who did not wish to be identified. There were very few files recording deliberations. The party hierarchy was such that Sanjay mostly issued verbal orders that were conveyed by Dhawan, Ambika and his other trusted associates.

Decades have passed since Sanjay's abrupt death on 23 June 1980, barely five months after Indira and he made a spectacular comeback to Raisina Hill. A large number of party leaders who hold important positions under Dr Manmohan Singh in the Sonia Gandhi-led Congress, continue to hold Sanjay in high esteem. In off-the-record conversations, they say they believe Sanjay was largely misunderstood, demonized and treated unfairly by both media and writers, perhaps due to the press censorship that prevailed during the Emergency. Congressmen of all hues privately wonder why no Congress president, from Rajiv, Narasimha Rao and Sitaram Kesri to Sonia, has considered setting up a party leadership training wing in Sanjay's memory.

After Sanjay's death, the Gandhis set up a Sanjay Gandhi Memorial Trust (SGMT), which ran a hospital in Amethi. But following Maneka's unceremonious exit from Indira's residence in 1982 and the subsequent bitterness that engulfed the two branches of the family, the trust now exists merely on paper. A board tucked inside the entrance of 24 Akbar Road announces that the SGMT is still alive, but its small makeshift office room holds no concrete evidence of the trust's activities.

Maneka has accused Sonia of neglecting Sanjay's legacy, querying why a trust named after her husband has neither her nor son Varun on its board. In an interview, she targeted SGMT secretary Captain Parveen Davar, saying, 'A stranger is sitting there. One who did not know him (Sanjay) or his views.' Davar reacted sharply to Maneka's accusation, saying he was committed to Sanjay's ideology as Maneka herself was not, having joined the BJP. Davar said the trust could not have been run by Maneka because, since Sanjay's death, Maneka has been opposed to 'whatever Sanjayji stood for'. (Philipose, Pamela, 'Centrestage, Interview of the Week', *Sunday,* 23 September 2001.)

Maneka countered Davar by saying that regardless of her

presence, the trust could have been utilized for carrying out Sanjay's five-point programme on family planning, environment protection, women's rights, cleanliness and education as most of these issues were relevant even today.

By January 1977, Indira realized that the time-bound necessity of the Emergency was over. She called for fresh elections, dissolved the already stretched Lok Sabha, released all political prisoners and prepared herself and the Congress for polls. The Emergency, with all its limitations, had not done any irreparable damage. Individual and political freedom existed even during it and no political opponent was shot. Even the most draconian provisions of the 42nd Amendment had not abolished the Supreme Court or ended the electoral process.

In fact, the Emergency failed to usher in any significant social or economic reforms to compensate for the absence of democracy. On a more significant count, the Congress party could not rid itself of its democratic ethos. This was evident in the manner in which the Congress MPs themselves voted to repeal much of the 42nd and other Emergency-era Constitutional amendments.

In a nutshell, Indira and Sanjay's flirtation with mild dictatorship taught most Indians about the dangers that threaten democracy. It educated them about demagoguery, disregard for liberty, placing power in the hands of a few, and of the dangers of worshipping leaders as heroes. It taught them that, like McCarthyism in the United States, constant vigilance by the State was the price that citizens have to pay for not having to live through such threatening times again.

The Congress's electoral defeat in 1977 was huge. Indira and Sanjay lost the polls from their own constituencies – Raibareli and Amethi respectively. In Uttar Pradesh, which had eighty-four Lok Sabha seats, the party drew a blank. Similar stories were rung in from all over north India. In a way, Indira had seen it coming. While campaigning, she asked the London-based industrialist Swaraj Paul to check how she was doing with Mark Tully of the BBC. Tully had bluntly presented a grim picture. At the dinner table, Indira turned to Paul to check Tully's assessment. In a low voice, Paul reproduced what Tully had said in a much harsher manner. To Paul's surprise, Indira was far from upset and said only, 'He is right.' Among other things, Tully had predicted Indira and Sanjay's personal defeat.

The durbar culture that Sanjay had engineered, coloured Indira's acumen and sense of judgement. This was evident from what she told Kuldip Nayar: 'You see, here is a question of whom the party wants and whom the people want. My position among the people is uncontested.' (Vasudev, Uma, *Two Faces of Indira Gandhi,* Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1977.) Her pride and arrogance reached

their climax during the Emergency. The sharp decline of moral values in politics and administration that took place during Indira's time had never been witnessed before in the country.

There is, even today, an ongoing debate within the Congress about whether the imposition of Emergency was a 'dark period'. A Congress publication commemorating 125 years of the party in 2010 claimed that 'the vast majority' had welcomed the Emergency initially, as general administration had improved. 'But civil rights activists took exception to the curbs on the freedom of expression and personal liberties. Unfortunately, in certain spheres, over-enthusiasm led to compulsions in the enforcement of certain programmes – like compulsory sterilization and the clearance of slums.'

About Sanjay's role, the Congress's faith historians recorded: 'Sanjay Gandhi, had by then, emerged as a leader of great significance. It was due to his support to family planning that the government decided to pursue it more vigorously. He also promoted slum clearance, anti-dowry measures and promotion of literacy but in an arbitrary and authoritarian manner much to the annoyance of the popular opinion.' (Mukherjee, Pranab (ed), *Congress and the Making of the Indian Nation*, Academic Foundation, New Delhi, 2011.)

The Congress's first defeat since Independence resulted in a mass exodus from the party. But the fighter in Indira was far from disturbed. Some senior party leaders, including the then Congress president, K. Brahmananda Reddy, on 1 January 1978, announced that Indira had been expelled from the party. Reddy had the support of many powerful leaders such as Y.B. Chavan, Vasant Dada Patil and Swaran Singh. D.K. Barooah, who had coined the slogan, 'Indira is India, India is Indira', was nowhere to be seen. The CWC met at the residence of Maragatham Chandrasekhar at 3 Janpath. Twelve members sided with Indira, but the AICC chief was not in a mood to be accommodating.

In the absence of V.C. Shukla, Bansi Lal, Ambika Soni, Karan Singh and D.K. Barooah, a somewhat lonely Indira found a new band of loyalists – Buta Singh, A.P. Sharma, G.K. Moopanar, Syed Mir Qasim, Maragatham Chandrasekhar and Budh Priya Maurya, all members of the CWC. They marched to Reddy to challenge Indira's expulsion. Buta, who was formerly with the Akali Dal, spoke harshly to Reddy, demanding to know how Nehru's daughter could be expelled from the Congress.

'She is the Congress,' Buta said, before walking out of Reddy's residence. His next destination was 12 Willingdon Crescent, where a

stoic Indira heard him narrate the sequence of events. However the moment Buta proudly told Indira how he had showed Reddy 'his place', she chided him for being impolite. 'After all, he is the Congress president,' she told him.

It was a battle of survival for the Congress and Indira's band of loyalists. Quickly, Buta, Sharma, Maurya, Moopanar, Mir Qasim and several others left on a nationwide tour to obtain the signatures of the seven-hundred-odd members of the AICC. They found majority support in Lucknow, Jaipur, Patna, Bhopal, Mumbai, Jammu, Srinagar, Hyderabad, Chennai, Kolkata, Thiruvananthapuram, Bangalore and other state capitals.

A convention was organized at Malvankar Hall in New Delhi on 2 January 1978, at which Indira announced that she was floating her own party, the Congress (I). Perhaps, Buta's assertion before Reddy that Nehru's daughter was 'the Congress' was still ringing in her ears.

The split cost Indira dearly. Apart from losing the support of seventy-six of the 153 members of the Lok Sabha, her new party was homeless. It had also lost control over the party symbol of a cow and her calf. Buta Singh, who was now the AICC general secretary, and had a room at 24 Akbar Road, petitioned the Election Commission, seeking a hold over the election symbol. The commission however 'froze' the symbol in the face of objections from the rival Congress, led by Swaran Singh and K. Brahmananda Reddy.

Indira was out in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, with P.V. Narasimha Rao when Buta was asked by the Election Commission to pick an election symbol; the choices were an elephant, a bicycle and an open palm. Buta was not sure which symbol he should choose, so he booked a trunk call to seek Indira's approval. The line was not very clear or, perhaps, Buta's Hindi pronunciation was so thick that Indira kept hearing *haathi* (elephant) instead of *haath* (hand). She kept saying no to it even as Buta kept trying to explain that it was not the elephant, but the open palm symbol that he was advising her to pick. The comedy of errors continued till an exasperated Indira handed the telephone over to Rao. In a matter of seconds, Rao, master of more than a dozen Indian and foreign languages, understood what Buta was trying to convey. He shouted, 'Buta Singhji, *panja kahiye, panja*.' Indira was relieved and took the receiver and said, '*Haan, haan, panja theek rahega* (Yes, yes, the open palm symbol will be appropriate).'

Initially, the hand symbol was ridiculed. Some Congressmen felt that it would remind voters of traffic policemen, but deep within her, Indira and her key associates were pleased because earlier critics had compared the Congress's cow and calf symbol to Indira and her son, Sanjay.

Before shifting to 24 Akbar Road, the Congress had tried to set up its office at the residences of various party leaders, but it could never get the 'right ambience'. For a few days before moving to 24 Akbar Road, Buta, Sharma and the others camped at Maragatham's house, 3 Janpath, and then at the residence of Pandit Kamalapati Tripathi. Tripathi, a devout Hindu from Benaras, was both accommodating and generous, but for Buta and the other AICC office-bearers, the hours-long daily hawan posed a hindrance. Apart from making a daily excuse for skipping the religious ritual, A.P. Sharma, himself a Brahmin, said he could never bring himself to work in a 'temple-like atmosphere'.

Buta then zeroed in on G. Venkatswamy, a Lok Sabha MP from Andhra Pradesh who lived alone at 24 Akbar Road. Venkatswamy's bachelor residence was 'open house' for many Youth Congress leaders, who would visit 10 Janpath, but use 24 Akbar Road for their siestas and other recreational activities.

H.K.L. Bhagat, an influential leader from Delhi, brought a wooden board that read 'All India Congress Committee (Indira)' to be put up at the entrance. Shoban Singh was put in charge of the office. His charter of duties encompassed working as office attendant, driver, cook and security in-charge.

When Venkatswamy returned from Andhra, he was pleased to see the party office board adorning his residence. He told Buta, '*Aapne achha kiya. Yeh sab kuchh Indiraji ka diya hua hai. Yeh sab unka hi hai* (I am glad you did this. All this has been given by Indiraji. It all belongs to her).'

Out of power, the party was beginning to feel the lack of funds. Once again, Buta's innovative thinking helped. As a matter of practice, all visiting party leaders were requested to 'donate' money to the new party. The South Indian MPs and leaders always obliged with a hundred rupees and more. Those from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar gave somewhat more stringently – ten or twenty rupees – but Buta accepted all the donations with humility and grace.

Buta also took the lead in organizing meals when visiting party members were hungry. If Buta was short of cash, he would quietly leave for Gurudwara Bangla Saheb and bring *langar*, the free community food served there. For the hungry Congress members, the simple daal, roti and halwa seemed truly a godsend.

Often, Buta would walk across the road to 2 Motilal Nehru Marg, the residence of Khurshed Alam Khan, son-in-law of former president Dr Zakir Hussain and father of Salman Khurshid, who later served as AICC office-bearer at 24 Akbar Road. This mild-mannered, suave, management graduate from Pennsylvania University and his family were always generous and willing to help Buta. Normally they had

elaborate, non-vegetarian meals, replete with kebabs, stews and shorbas, but they would add vegetables freshly grown in their kitchen garden to cater to the vegetarians.

Buta, Sharma, Maurya and Antulay received no salary from the party. In fact, the Congress has no tradition of paying for work. Even when Sonia and Rahul Gandhi introduced corporate culture in the party and economist Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh initiated multisectoral reforms, the concept of 'work and pay' never occurred to them. During the Rajiv era, AICC general secretaries started getting a paltry three thousand rupees as 'fuel charges', which by 2010 rose to nine thousand rupees per month.

24 Akbar Road also saw the entry of General Shahnawaz Khan, a three-time Lok Sabha member and former Union minister in the Nehru cabinet. After the Emergency and the ensuing electoral defeat, Khan's services were requisitioned by Indira to train the Congress's youth wing.

Shahnawaz Khan was a Punjabi Muslim who had served in an Indian regiment under the British Empire during World War II. He was captured by the Japanese in South Asia and handed over to Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army (INA) with the intention that he be commissioned as a soldier. Soon after he joined the INA he teamed up with Lieutenant Colonel Bhonsle to galvanize the INA ranks against the British. Once World War II was over, the British tried him and other INA soldiers on charges of treason. The prisoners potentially faced the death penalty, life imprisonment or, at the minimum, a heavy fine if found guilty. Shahnawaz Khan, Colonel Habib Ur Rahman, Colonel Prem Sahgal and Colonel Gurubaksh Singh Dhillon were tried at the Red Fort in Delhi for 'waging war against the King Emperor'. They were defended ably by Nehru on the grounds that they should be treated as prisoners of war, not paid mercenaries.

After Bose's death in 1945 and the independence of India, the INA was dismantled, but its members received no pensions and were debarred from entering the Indian Armed Forces. Nehru requested Shahnawaz Khan to join the Congress. In 1956, in response to public clamour to investigate the circumstances of Bose's death, Nehru constituted a committee to delve into the matter. Shahnawaz Khan headed the panel with Suresh Chandra Bose, Subhas Bose's elder brother, and S.N. Mitra, a nominee of the West Bengal government. The panel concluded that Subhas Bose had indeed died in the aeroplane crash at Taihoku (now Taipei) in Formosa (now Taiwan) on 18 August 1945. The committee declared that the ashes kept at Tokyo's Renkoji Temple were those of Subhas Bose. It recommended that the government bring the ashes to India with due honour and

erect a memorial to the freedom fighter.

Twice every week, a punctual Shahnawaz Khan would arrive at 24 Akbar Road to sit and chat with Buta Singh, Sharma, Antulay and the others. He would then walk to 10 Janpath to hold meetings with the Youth Congress leaders. In complete contrast to the belligerence witnessed during the Emergency, the freedom fighter's presence had a sobering impact on the youngsters. General Shahnawaz Khan's constant thrust was on building strong moral character. He used to say that a nation bereft of values was doomed to lose.

General Shahnawaz Khan had an adopted daughter, called Latif Fatima, who was married to Taj Mohammad. Their son, the well-known actor Shah Rukh Khan, has outshone his grandfather in terms of fame and fortune. When Shah Rukh was young, Shahnawaz Khan used to describe him as a 'true nationalist' for his mother's family came to India from Rawalpindi at a time when millions of Muslims were leaving India for Pakistan.

Shah Rukh moved closer to the Congress between 2004 and 2010 and became friends with Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi. He knew Priyanka from his younger days in Delhi, both having had a common interest in fashion. When Shah Rukh went calling at 10 Janpath to thank Sonia Gandhi for her unflinching support during the release of *My Name Is Khan*, which saw heavy protests from the Shiv Sena, Sonia reportedly told him that her party's response was guided by the larger national interest. Sonia is said to have complimented him for making a film that she had enjoyed watching.

There has been constant speculation whether King Khan, as Shah Rukh is referred to, would team up with Rahul Gandhi for a common political goal. The obvious frame of reference was the Rajiv–Amitabh bonhomie, which saw the megastar joining politics in 1984 to assist his childhood buddy. One reason why Shah Rukh did not become a Congress campaigner was that Rahul and he had not been childhood friends like Amitabh and Rajiv.

General Shahnawaz Khan worked for free and used his own aged Fiat to travel from the walled city of Delhi to 24 Akbar Road because the AICC was hopelessly short of vehicles for its office-bearers. Once again, the worldly-wise Buta Singh came to the party's rescue. Buta had many friends in Lutyens' Delhi, including those who ran a flourishing transport business in the national capital. Buta used his friendship with Jagjit Singh of the Tourist Taxi Service at Janpath to avail of his fleet of yellow and black cabs. At times, both Indira and Sanjay counted on Buta's bonhomie with Jagjit to avail of transport. On most occasions, Jagjit turned down Buta's offer to pay for his cabs. When Indira returned to power, she remembered Jagjit's selfless service and granted him a ticket from an assembly segment near

Chandigarh, where Mohali town has now come up. The owners of the Karachi Taxi Service in Connaught Place were also close to the Congress, but they suffered grievously during the anti-Sikh riots triggered by Indira's assassination in 1984.

Buta Singh was a former member of the Akali Dal. He had been a Marxist in his younger days, when he was studying for his Master's degree in history at Mumbai's Khalsa College. When Stalin died in 1953, Buta wept bitterly. Hailing from an extremely modest village called Mustafapur near Jalandhar, Buta had a penchant for going for the kill regardless of the consequences. When he was barely seven, his uncle showed Buta a hornets' nest and told him it was a beehive full of honey. Two days later, Buta's sister, Pritam Kaur, heard the young boy screaming. He had tried to climb up to the nest, been attacked by a swarm of hornets, fallen from the tree and broken his leg.

Buta worked as a sub-editor with *Akali Patrika* before the Shiromani Akali Dal fielded him from the Ropar reserved seat in 1962. When the Akalis split, Buta joined the Master Tara Singh Group. But soon after, he was introduced to Indira and joined the Congress.

During the Rajiv era, Buta rose to the position of virtual number two in the government, upstaging two senior ministers, P.V. Narasimha Rao and P. Shiv Shankar. He had more access to Rajiv than anyone else in the party. Buta did not have the ambition to become a Caesar or a Rasputin, but he loved his reputation as Rajiv's axe man. Between 1985 and 1989, as home minister, he toppled so many state governments that, in 1988, Rajiv told him in jest:

'Buta Singhji, *ab aap kirpan andar rakhiye* (Buta Singhji, please sheath your *kirpan* now)', while referring to the change of ministerial cabinets in Madhya Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Tripura, Rajasthan and Bihar.

Buta lost his glory and his political clout when he changed political loyalties too fast, joining the BJP and then returning to the Congress. He was made governor of Bihar, but his Machiavellian habits landed him in controversy. Buta recommended the dissolution of the Bihar assembly in 2005, but the move was sharply criticized by the Supreme Court. The apex court ruled that Buta had acted in haste and misled the Union cabinet because he did not want Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal (United) and the BJP to form the government.

On 26 January 2006, Buta sent a fax to the then president of India, Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, resigning from the post of Bihar governor. Once the dust had settled, Sonia and Manmohan Singh appointed him chairman of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes, according him a cabinet berth and a palatial house in Lutyens' Delhi.

Another unsavoury controversy followed when Buta's son, Sarabjot Singh, was charged with demanding a hefty bribe of Rs 1 crore and exploiting his father's official position. There was pressure on Buta to resign, but he managed to save his post by pointing out that he headed a statutory commission, the objective of which was to serve the cause of scheduled castes. The commission empowered its heads, in other words, Buta, to 'have all the powers of a civil court trying a suit'. As head of the commission, Buta had the power of a civil court in summoning and enforcing the attendance of any person from any part of India and examining him on oath; requiring the discovery and production of any document; receiving evidence on affidavits; requisitioning any public record or copy thereof from any court or office; and issuing commissions for the examination of witnesses and documents.

Coming back to Buta's ability to organize vehicles for the AICC, the Congress continued to face the problem of not having enough vehicles at its disposal. From the 1960s till the 1990s, the party would 'borrow' vehicles, mostly jeeps, for electioneering. But the tradition had a flip side as most candidates 'forgot' to return the jeeps once the elections were over. Indira, Rajiv, Narasimha Rao and Sitaram Kesri all struggled with the problem of paucity of vehicles till Sonia arrived in 1998 and put an end to the custom of borrowing vehicles.

In most cases, the AICC was able to get back some 50 per cent of its jeeps after it 'threatened' erring leaders with ouster from the party. The 'defaulters' invariably included many of the high-ranking officials of the party. As per the system, the jeeps were assigned to the district party presidents, who were supposed to surrender them after use, but they more often than not expressed their inability to recover them from the candidates.

When biographer Dom Moraes went to see Indira after her 1977 defeat, he found her to have shrunk physically, but she spoke to him cheerfully enough, saying, 'I feel as though an enormous weight has been lifted off my shoulders.' But when party colleague Aruna Asaf Ali tried to cheer her up, saying the people would come back to the Congress, Indira queried impatiently, 'When?'

Mohsina Kidwai, a Congress leader from Uttar Pradesh who rose to become Union minister and AICC general secretary, recalled that though Indira was a bit disappointed initially, by early 1978 she was back in 'full gear', ready to hold public meetings. Indira had fielded Mohsina as the Congress nominee from Azamgarh in a by-election after the Congress rout of 1977. Mohsina overcame many odds to win the election and that victory in Azamgarh proved to be the harbinger of Indira's and the Congress's return from the wilderness.

Indira focused on more political work. She addressed the AICC delegates and told them:

'Believe me, we do not want to remove this government before it is time for it to go, but we can, with the tremendous force that we have, change its tendencies. If we stand solidly with the Harijans, who will have the courage to go and burn their houses? If we stand solidly behind the minorities, who will have the courage to go and harass them?' (Johari, J.C., *Indian National Congress since Independence*, Lotus Press, New Delhi, 2006.)

The political resolution adopted in 1978 said that this was the first time that the Congress, after staying in power for three decades, had bowed out of office. It was, therefore, necessary to emphasize once again the party's socio-economic policies, to spell out effectively programmes for the broad-based mobilization of Congressmen and the masses, and to take up a reappraisal of all Congress policies to build a secular society. Indira decided to set up a machinery to intervene, at short notice, in any situation of communal tension anywhere, and to ensure the safeguarding of the rights of minorities and their effective participation in all spheres of national life.

The Janata Party, a rainbow coalition of the right wing, centrists and the socialists, was not keen to let Indira return so easily. Several criminal cases were filed against her in addition to the Shah Commission of inquiry. Indira spent a week in jail. Sonia would take her home-cooked food every day because she refused to eat or drink anything not provided by her family. Sonia made sure that either young Rahul or Priyanka accompanied her on each visit. The visits served several purposes. In addition to showing family solidarity, it helped to familiarize the young Gandhis with the Nehru– Gandhi tradition and to prepare them for the upheavals and hardships that destiny could bring them.

In an article written after Maneka's split with Indira, and quoted in Ali Siddiqui's privately published book, *Son of India,* Mohammad Yunus recalled why Indira had chosen to thank Sonia and not Maneka when she was released from Tihar Jail. 'Why did she not say a word about Maneka?'

Yunus explained, 'Because the second daughter-in-law was whiling away her time watching video films, exchanging hot words with her husband and, except for once, never bothered to visit her in jail.'

Yunus claimed that he had witnessed many clashes between Sanjay and Maneka. 'I got to know about the differences between

them because she was forever complaining about him, maligning him and calling him names. Sanjay, too, once told me of the things he did not like about her. His aversion to socializing irked her a great deal and she was forever fussing about it.'

Yunus said the couple's worst fight took place in 1976 when Maneka reportedly threw her engagement ring at Sanjay and told him, 'I do not want to keep this rubbish.' The ring had been worn by Kamla Nehru and Indira had chosen it sentimentally for her daughter-in-law. Yunus said Sanjay gave it back to Indira, saying, 'She does not realize its value.' The ring is now worn by Priyanka Gandhi.

Sanjay was imprisoned several times. Even when Indira was out of power, the Morarji Desai government tried to harass him. A black Ambassador packed with intelligence officials would follow him everywhere. One day, Sanjay drew his van closer to the car and said, 'Fuel is so expensive these days. Why don't we save you the bother of bringing a car? You come and sit in my van or I move in with you guys.' The car stopped following him.

Maneka has a different take on events and recalls how, when Sanjay was out of prison, he took her to Kashmir, designed a bookshelf for her and treated a sick dog for her. 'His only goal was to strive for excellence. His only "ism" was perfectionism. When I met him first, he was engaged in teaching himself how to manoeuvre speedboats. And when he could not go any further, he took up flying. Swami Dhirendra Brahmachari and I, too, took it up at the same time, but we gave it up when Swamiji crashed his plane and I had a near miss.' (Gandhi, Maneka, *Sanjay Gandhi,* Vakil, Feffers & Simons Ltd, Mumbai, 1980.)

The inherent contradictions in the Janata Party brought the government down quickly. At eighty-three, Morarji Desai was stubborn and inflexible. His home minister Charan Singh, who was seventy-six in 1979, had his Sancho Panza in Raj Narain, who got in touch with Sanjay with a plea to make Charan Singh the prime minister of India. Sensing an opportunity, Sanjay made the promise. Charan Singh resigned from the Desai cabinet and split the Janata Party on 9 July 1979. Lonely and embittered, Desai resigned. Sanjay worked in close coordination with Raj Narain and, on 28 July, Charan Singh became prime minister with external support from the Congress. However, the new government collapsed within twenty-four days and mid-term polls were announced.

24 Akbar Road was suddenly buzzing with excitement. Buta, Antulay, Moopanar, Pranab Mukherjee and all the rest had to work very hard –

often more than twenty hours a day – to prepare for the polls. Funds were always a constraint. Once again, Sanjay took charge and showed his now mature political colours. He insisted on the Youth Congress getting a hundred Lok Sabha seats, a share that the youth in the party failed to get in 2009 under Sonia and Rahul Gandhi. The politician in Sanjay also made sure that each of the regional satraps was cut down to size and that loyalty to the Gandhi family was never betrayed.

Each day, Indira and Sanjay would be airborne, off on a punishing schedule. Together, they notched up record breaking statistics, each covering a distance of more than forty thousand kilometres and addressing as many as fifteen to twenty public meetings in a day.

Newsweek commented on the Janata Party leaders: 'At times, it seemed they were running not so much against a diminutive sixty-two-year-old political candidate, but a myth, a legend in sari and dusty sandals.' (*Newsweek*, 31 January 1980.)

According to one estimate, Indira and Sanjay reached out to a hundred million people directly and managed to be heard or seen by at least one out of every four voters. This was an incredible feat in an era when newspaper reach was limited and there was no twenty-four-hour television.

The joy of the 1980 Lok Sabha victory was overshadowed by the tragedy that struck soon after. On 23 June 1980, when Indira's grandson, Feroze Varun Gandhi, was merely a hundred days old, Sanjay decided to try out the new Pitts S-2, a two-seater plane, early in the morning. For Sanjay, there was no greater freedom than the freedom of the open skies. Maneka wrote in her book on him:

'It was as if he could not find anyone to race against him; he had to run against himself, excel himself, to conquer the elements. This was the way he would have liked to die. He often said to me that it was the quickest and least painful way to go.'

The body of the young AICC general secretary arrived at 24 Akbar Road in the afternoon, draped in the Congress flag. Braving the scorching heat, thousands of party-workers thronged the party office. Drenched in sweat, many started beating their chests, while the women pulled their hair. There were extraordinary scenes all over. The AICC *karamcharis* could not believe that the same man who had been sitting with them the previous day, had been reduced to a corpse stitched together by surgeons.

Frontier Gandhi Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan was in New Delhi the day Sanjay died. Khan was undergoing treatment at AIIMS and Sanjay had gone to visit him a few days before his death. Khan, who was also known as Badshah Khan, insisted upon attending Sanjay's funeral. He travelled with Yunus Khan, who, instead of taking the Delhi Gate–

Daryaganj route, went via Ring Road to reach Shanti Van, where Sanjay was cremated. Khan, a veteran freedom fighter, was surprised to see Ring Road chock-a-block with surging crowds. Khan observed, ‘This boy must have done a lot for the people. Otherwise, they would not have come in such large numbers to mourn him. I have never seen such a crowd over a death.’

At 24 Akbar Road, Sanjay had been a popular figure. He liked to attend to everything. If stationery had to be bought, it required Sanjay’s clearance. His room was an open house for the dozens of party leaders arriving from all over the country. Sanjay was a stickler for rules and kept a tight grip on finances. When he died and whispers began about the amount of money that Sanjay had allegedly amassed, Rajiv Gandhi told B.K. Nehru that twenty lakh rupees had been deposited by Sanjay in the party office.

After Sanjay’s tragic demise, 24 Akbar Road remained deserted for six months. The 1 Safdarjung Road house was divided sharply between Indira’s aggressive and ambitious daughter-in-law, Maneka, and her elder son, Rajiv, who had quit his Indian Airlines job to assist ‘Mummy’. The relationship between Maneka and Sonia was chilly. The two daughters-in-law seldom talked to each other and avoided being in the same room together unless it was absolutely necessary. Indira was too lost in mourning her son to care.

chapter three

The Technology Man

'He says his wife will divorce him if he joins politics,' Indira Gandhi told writer Khushwant Singh, when he asked her if her son Rajiv would fill the gap left by his brother Sanjay. For several months after Sanjay's fateful air crash, Indira appeared to be in a dilemma over inducting Rajiv into politics.

Indira visited Kenya in August 1981. She took Rajiv's children, Priyanka and Rahul, and a young Varun (who was a year-and-a-half old) and Maneka along with her.

Her next visit was to Mexico to attend the International Economic Conference; Rajiv's wife, Sonia, went with her this time. The tour to Italy, France and Romania in November 1981 saw both daughters-in-law accompany her. The prime minister exercised the same pattern of impartiality when at home in Delhi and took one or the other daughter-in-law to the social functions that she attended.

Mohammad Yunus claimed that Maneka's conduct after Sanjay's death did not help her cause. Initially, Indira was keen to accommodate her as her social secretary, but the move was shelved when Sonia opposed it. Rajiv and Sonia were apparently disturbed by certain events that took place at Indira's home. Yunus narrated an episode in his article, 'A Tale of Two Brothers', in Ali Siddiqui's *Son of India,* about the time when Maneka's younger sister, Ambika, was staying at the prime minister's residence. Ambika's birthday was celebrated by some of her friends in a rather flamboyant manner, with the birthday girl reportedly dressed as Cleopatra; and all this very soon after Sanjay's death. 'The sight made even the servants at the prime minister's house gasp with shock,' recalled Yunus.

The still grief-stricken Indira began to rely more and more on Rajiv. Sanjay's room was now occupied by Maneka. The door leading to it from Indira's bedroom was closed and the door leading to Rajiv's room was opened.

Ten days before Sanjay's death, Indira had appointed him general secretary of the AICC. By August 1980, Congress leaders stepped up the pressure on Indira to draft Rajiv into the party. A large number of MPs, led by Shivraj Patil, signed a petition requesting Rajiv to take up Sanjay's work. When Patil called on Indira, the prime minister said irritably: 'He is not into politics. He is not interested.' But the

politician in Patil did not feel slighted. His political instincts paid dividends a few months later when Indira made him a cabinet minister. Patil, a Sai Baba devotee, went on to become Lok Sabha speaker, Union home minister and governor, but missed the chance of becoming president of India in 2007 because of stiff opposition from the left parties. This resulted in the appointment of the first woman president of the country, Pratibha Patil.

According to T.N. Kaul, a diplomat and close family friend of the Nehrus and the Gandhis, Indira was both lonely and in shock after Sanjay's death. The shock was great and she tried too hard to suppress it, avoiding shedding tears in public. But that too had its effect on her and she began feeling more insecure and lonely. 'I asked her why do you not ask Rajiv to stand by your side, not to join the government, but to join the party and hold your hand, just as you held your father's hand when he was lonely? She said, "I will not influence Rajiv's judgement, he should do what he likes. If you wish to speak to him, you may." (T.N. Kaul interviewed by Brook Associates; 23 April, 1996 quoted in Adams, Jad, and Whitehead, Philips. *The Dynasty: The Nehru–Gandhi Story*, Penguin Books/BBC Books, London, 1997.)

So Kaul told both Rajiv and Sonia that Rajiv should live up to Indira's expectations. He recalled that Indira had sacrificed her personal and domestic life in the service of her father, despite being a woman. Many years later, Rahul Gandhi followed in the footsteps of his father and grandmother to live up to the family tradition of leaving a professional career to serve the party and the country.

Rajiv had numerous meetings with Kaul and others before agreeing to join politics. By this time, Maneka was rapidly losing support in the Indira household and among Congressmen. The power equations changed quickly. Dhawan and Dhirendra Brahmachari turned their backs on Maneka and began lobbying for Rajiv. Maneka turned to Yunus saying, 'Yunus *chacha*, you have to be on my side.' Yunus replied, 'Of course, I will always be with those living in this house (Indira's residence).' Maneka got impatient with Yunus, insisting, 'No, no, you have to be on my side.' Yunus asked her if she considered herself a separate entity from the other family members. Maneka then spoke about the difficulties that she was facing in her marital home.

Sanjay's death made Indira come to distrust all aircraft and she increased the pressure on Rajiv to give up flying. In 1981, Rajiv was about to become a Boeing captain when he decided to resign from his job and take up politics, the family profession.

In those eleven months, Sonia had reconciled herself to becoming a politician's wife and understood that Indira needed her elder son

more than anyone else. Rajiv described it as a 'joint decision' after long talks and said, 'I felt that there was a void and I could not see anybody else filling it; there was in a sense an inevitability about it.'

A day after resigning from Indian Airlines, Rajiv filed his nomination papers for the Amethi Lok Sabha seat, which had fallen vacant after Sanjay's death. Maneka tried hard to edge Rajiv out, but she was not twenty-five at the time – the minimum age required to contest polls in India. Yunus claimed that Maneka wanted Indira to amend the country's Constitution to let her in, but the prime minister refused. Maneka held Rajiv and Sonia responsible for the refusal and walked out of Indira's residence. She went on to contest the 1984 election against Rajiv in Amethi only to forfeit her deposit.

After winning the Amethi Lok Sabha seat on 17 August 1981, Rajiv was made general secretary of the AICC on 2 February 1983. He occupied a large room next to Indira's at 24 Akbar Road, the same room from where veteran leader H.N. Bahuguna had functioned briefly as 'secretary general' of the Congress. Bahuguna, a towering leader from Uttar Pradesh, had since left the party. Just before the 1980 general elections, Sanjay, Indira and Buta Singh had gone to his residence to request him to join the party. Bahugana agreed, but bargained hard. He wanted to replace Indira as party chief, but Sanjay was bitterly opposed to this.

Rajiv had been Sanjay's best friend, yet he was remarkably different from his younger brother. The two brothers were extremely friendly, had many friends in common – Amitabh and Ajitabh Bachchan, Kabir Bedi and Adil Shaharyar – and enjoyed partying together. But in many ways, the two brothers had different temperaments. Yunus recalled how difficult it was to select a present for Sanjay because he was so particular, but Rajiv was always happy to receive any gift. 'Once, when he (Sanjay) was only seven, I inquired whether he would like a gift or cash. He gave me a serious look and quietly whispered, "*Paise hi de do. Kisi kaam aa jayenge*" (Give me cash. It will come handy sometime).'

Rajiv had a different worldview. His political thoughts were initially hazy, lacking the ideological firmness of his grandfather who, in many ways, was the architect of independent India. Nehru was influenced by the Fabian socialist thinking of Britain. At the same time, he had more than a sneaking admiration for the Soviet success in economic, centralized planning. Under him, between 1947 and 1964, the country saw state-led production goals and investment guidelines that consciously tried to prevent a monopoly. These objectives were achieved through a licence or regulatory system in which the state played a critical role. However, Nehru was more

pragmatic than dogmatic.

Back in October 1951, he had told AICC delegates: 'The only test of any system we apply is that it gives us the desired results. It is that objective that counts and not the method. To what extent there should be public sector or private must, therefore, be judged by the results.' It was also significant to note that after Independence, Nehru left the agriculture sector entirely to the private sector, unlike many socialist and communist nations of that era.

Speaking in the Lok Sabha in 1956, Nehru had again spelt out his economic thinking, saying:

'Broadly speaking, what do we mean when we say "socialist" pattern of life? We mean a society in which there is an equality of opportunity and the possibility for everyone to live a good life. Obviously, this cannot be attained unless we produce the wherewithal to have the standards that a good life implies. We have, therefore, to lay a great stress on equality, on the removal of disparities, and it has to be remembered that socialism is not spreading of poverty. The essential thing is that there must be wealth and production.'

Indira, too, continued to put a lot of emphasis on socialism, but she missed little opportunity to promote the private sector. By the time she returned to power in 1980, she had a distinct right tilt, which saw the shifting of a rather rigid R. Venkataraman from the finance ministry to the defence ministry and the entry of an industry-friendly Pranab Mukherjee as the country's finance minister.

But in spite of these measures, the system of controls continued through most part of the Nehruvian and Indira eras. In a study conducted by J. Eccheverri-Gent (1990), it was observed that a single application to set up an industrial plant had to satisfy as many as eighty-six different enactments and control agencies before receiving approval. By 1992, of the twenty-five largest businesses in terms of sales, fourteen were owned by the government.

Professor Jagdish Bhagwati termed the sluggish growth of the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s as similar to that of the Soviet Union, where savings and investment increased, but productive growth was very slow. In India's case, Bhagwati felt that extensive bureaucratic control over production, investment, trade, inward-looking trade policies, and the country's failure to spread primary education were responsible for the messy situation. These policy failures resulted in a shortage of power, rail transportation and communication facilities.

Sanjay had little economic thinking of his own beyond his 'talk less, work more' motto. There were no intellectuals among his set of advisors, who included the likes of Dhawan, Bansi Lal and Om Mehta. The people who advised him said things that they thought Sanjay wanted to hear. Khwaja Ahmad Abbas saw a problem in Sanjay's lack

of reading habits and formal education. 'The individual who is advised should have the capacity and the willingness to receive advice, to reject advice,' he said.

Rajiv understood what the country needed. In some ways, he was a 'professional' as compared to the other members of the Nehru–Gandhi family, from Jawaharlal Nehru to Sonia Gandhi, simply because he had worked as a professional in Indian Airlines, whereas the others had been merely politicians or home-makers turned politicians. Drawing from Sanjay's experience, Rajiv realized that politics was much beyond power or money. For a good part of his tenure, Rajiv discouraged Sanjay's followers in the party in favour of those who had been achievers in universities and in other professions. The choice of Sam Pitroda, Arun Singh, Arun Nehru, Mani Shankar Aiyar and others was a pointer in that direction. From the very beginning, Rajiv appeared technology-oriented, believing in science and technology to solve some of the country's age-old problems.

When Rajiv succeeded his mother, Indira, as prime minister under extremely trying circumstances, he quickly shifted funds towards enlarging the capacity and modernization of the country's infrastructure. He saw the need for investment from private players and to usher in an era of economic restructuring. Rajiv understood the disadvantages of the comprehensive system of controls on industry that existed at the time. Soon after taking over, Rajiv went about dismantling the 'licence raj' in twenty-five industries and 'broadbanded' some industries, permitting a range of products in the general field in which the firm held a licence.

Rajiv's efforts won approval from Jagdish Bhagwati and others who saw India going down the 'right path' in 1985. Industrial production rose by 125 per cent from 1985 to 1997, compared with 87 per cent in the previous twelve years.

While Rajiv was launching economic reforms and restructuring the economy, his party watched in approval. There was hardly any discussion or debate over what the reformist prime minister was trying to do or achieve. Initially, the Congress leaders saw Rajiv as someone who was fulfilling the role of Indira's key advisor and then as her 'heir apparent'. Rajiv's first test was when he was given the task of organizing the Asian Games in 1982.

On 19 November 1982, Indira turned sixty-five and her birthday gift was the well-organized opening ceremony of the Asian Games. Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium was packed to capacity when film actor Amitabh Bachchan rose to recite a hymn in his familiar baritone and said, 'We welcome you all to these celebrations in this ancient land of ours… to this awakened land of ours.' Rajiv sat alongside Indira, a

broad, contented smile on his face.

Organizing the Asian Games had been a nightmare for Indira. By late 1981, there were too many logistical and political problems obstructing the creation of infrastructure. The Punjab separatist problem had raised a serious question mark over safety during the Games. The opportunity to hold the Games had been won by the Janata Party, but internal bickering had put it on the backburner. Sanjay's death had corroded Indira's energies and sense of enterprise. She broached the topic of the Games with Buta Singh at 24 Akbar Road in her presidential chamber. Buta, whose sports ministry was struggling to accelerate the preparations for the Games, asked Indira to assign the task to Rajiv, pointing out that the young Gandhi had a keen eye for details and, therefore, he should be spared from party work to focus on the Games.

V.C. Shukla had staged a comeback by then and joined as chairman of the Asian Games. Having lost clout after the Emergency and Sanjay's death, Shukla, in his capacity as Games chairman, kept experimenting with loyalists – mainly inefficient bureaucrats – till Rajiv lost his cool and handed over full charge to Buta Singh. According to K. Sankaran Nair, (*Inside IB and RAW: The Rolling Stone that Gathered Moss*, Manas Publications, New Delhi, 2008), secretary general of the Special Organizing Committee (SOC) set up for the Games, there was an unsavoury incident that put Rajiv off completely. One day, two retired doctors, an admiral and a colonel, called on Nair, saying Shukla had sent them with a request to issue them free Air India tickets to visit East Germany. Nair had the power to issue free tickets for work-related assignments.

'I asked the doctors why they wished to visit East Germany. They said they had been asked to study the successful use of drugs in that country for enhanced performance by athletes so that similar action could be taken here to ensure medals for India. I was absolutely shocked to hear this and told the visitors, "I cannot accede to this request, which, besides being preposterous, would lead to the disqualification of our athletes in drug tests and bring everlasting shame on our country. Goodbye, gentlemen."'

Indira understood the need to showcase the Asian Games to the rest of the world. New Delhi desperately needed a face-lift, new freeways, stadiums and quality hotels. Rajiv became convener of the SOC. Secretary general Sankaran Nair, the brilliant former head of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), had been treated badly by Sanjay, but Rajiv had a special liking for him. He later appointed Nair Indian high commissioner to Singapore.

For Rajiv, Buta and Nair, it was a race against time. What would have normally taken six years to achieve had to be accomplished in

less than two years. Suddenly, all the bureaucratic delays and goof-ups disappeared and licences and clearances were achieved without delay. Steel, cement and other building material were obtained from all available resources because at an informal level, Rajiv had the power to order whatever was required without Cabinet clearance.

Rajiv had a way of getting things done. Quite often, he would call a top bureaucrat and his minister to report progress before the SOC. Nair, who had served with the Intelligence Bureau and RAW, would present a factual report, which was mostly severe and cited delays. Rajiv would then request the minister to visit the site with his head of department for an on-the-spot inspection. Much to the consternation of the minister, Rajiv would himself reach there and point out inaccuracies in the official version. He would then ask the minister politely to finish the work by a given date. A.B.A. Ghani Khan Choudhary was Union railway minister when the SOC noticed that a ring railway project was running hopelessly late. Rajiv requested Choudhary to visit the site along with the railway board chief. At the site, the exaggerated claims of the railways were exposed and Ghani almost exploded in rage. The result was that the ring railways project was ready within a few weeks, indicating that strong leadership and a whip could work wonders in India.

Rajiv often thought out of the box. He felt that the Games should reach out to every Indian. In Rajiv's scheme of things, there could be no better way than television to transmit the country's sports achievements and the government's efforts to make the Games a grand success.

The Indira government suddenly slashed import duty on colour television sets. This was followed by a push to the state-run Doordarshan. In the next six months, twenty transmitters were installed all over the country. An agreement was signed with INTELSAT to beam daily capsules of the Games. Dozens of state-of-the-art broadcast vans, electronic cameras and other hardware were imported. Technicians from the United Kingdom, Japan and the United States were requisitioned to train the Doordarshan technicians. The actual cost of organizing the Games must have been more, but Rajiv and his team recovered the official one hundred and fifty crore rupees spent on it by auctioning the Games Village once the show was over.

Rajiv's presence also had a motivating impact on the Indian athletes and their participation. P.T. Usha bagged two silver medals (she won four gold and one silver in the 1986 Seoul Games), while Charles Borrmomeo and M.D. Valsamma set the track ablaze. The hockey team missed a gold when it performed miserably against Pakistan, going down one-seven.

Indira was delighted with the Games. Her son had proved himself. India had shown the world that it could do anything. But the sceptics kept pointing at the wrongs. Journalists Mark Tully and Satish Jacob later observed in their book, *Amritsar: Mrs. Gandhi's Last Battle* (Rupa & Co. by arrangement with Pan Books, London, 1985): 'He (Rajiv) bulldozed his way through the Indian bureaucracy and achieved what by the standards of any country was the largest ever Asian Games in two years.'

When Delhi hosted the 2010 Commonwealth Games, a section of the Congress wanted the young general secretary to follow his father's footsteps and become part of Games' organizing committee. But both Rahul and Sonia opposed the move on the grounds that it would trigger many controversies.

In retrospect, their apprehensions proved correct as the 2010 Games made more news for off-the-field corruption than on-field performances. The man in eye of the storm in the 2010 Games, who caused acute embarassment to Sonia and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, had Rajiv Gandhi as his mentor. It was under Rajiv that the little-known general secretary of Maharashtra Congress, a former air force officer, had shot into prominence. In 1997, Suresh Kalmadi missed the presence of the Gandhis so much that he left the party under Sitaram Kesri to join the BJP.

Rajiv, who was a man in hurry and constantly looking for 'talent' liked Kalmadi for his 'out-of-the-box' thinking. Rajiv liked Kalmadi's idea of holding a Pune Marathon to create awareness for the games way back in 1982. In Pune, a stronghold of Sharad Pawar, V.N. Gadgil and other veterans, Rajiv felt he was something of a 'lightweight'. But the fiercely loyal Kalmadi kept the powerful satraps at bay. Kalmadi was inducted into the Rajya Sabha in 1982 thanks to Rajiv.

By the time Rajiv became prime minister, Kalmadi was heading the Indian Athletics Federation of India. He used to give a hard time to the then sports minister, Margaret Alva. His generosity and his habit of wining and dining journalists was legendary. At one point, Alva was heard asking Union youth and sports secretary the reason why she got constant bad press, while he didn't. The bearded official replied that it was due to 'high spirits'. Rajiv's death in 1991 changed lot of equations. Kalmadi became Pawar's hench-man, in much the same way that Amar Singh was Mulayam Singh Yadav's during his heyday. Kalmadi had an unconventional method of functioning. When the jockeying for prime ministership began among Narasimha Rao, Sharad Pawar, Arjun Singh and Dr Shankar Dayal Sharma, Kalmadi took it upon himself to 'manage Delhi' for his Maratha strongman. A lavish dinner was organized at a five-star hotel to influence newly-

elected Congress MPs and Rajya Sabha MPs. As many as 64 MPs from various states attended the event. This development sent shock-waves through the Congress, even unnerving an apolitical but not indifferent Sonia Gandhi at 10 Janpath. Narasimha Rao was so shaken that for the rest of his tenure he kept a copy of the guest list just to keep them out of any position of influence.

There was a clamour to appoint Rajiv AICC general secretary. The Congress had suffered defeats in the Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka assembly polls in January 1983. The electoral reverses in these states had upset Indira greatly because Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka had remained loyal to her even in 1977. What was more worrying was that Maneka's breakaway party had won four of the five seats that her party had contested and had also won an important Lok Sabha by-election in Malihabad, Uttar Pradesh.

Indira agreed and, on 2 February 1983, Rajiv became one of the seven general secretaries of the AICC. He was given a room next to Indira's at 24 Akbar Road. He was the 'senior-most' because he was the 'heir apparent'. Indira's brief was clear. Rajiv was expected to reorganize and revitalize the party that had moved from being mass-based to an organization that was controlled from the centre.

Rajiv divided his time between his three places of work. 24 Akbar Road was for meeting party delegations from the states and attending to organizational work. A suite at his residence was made accessible from a separate residence on the Akbar Road side. Rajiv was given a private secretary, Vincent George, and two associates, Vijay Dhar and Arun Singh. Vijay Dhar, wiry and aquiline-nosed, remained Rajiv's close friend and a close political aide between 1981–85. By the time Rajiv became prime minister, Dhar's postion was shrouded in ambiguity. Rather tactfully, Dhar lowered his profile in Rajiv's charmed circle and began devoting more time to his father-in-law's business as owner of Srinagar's Broadway group of hotels.

George quickly emerged in the league of Dhawan, Yashpal Kapoor, and M.L. Fotedar as an influential palace guard. His initial key to power was his famed ability to type a hundred and forty words a minute. The winner of a typing competition that described him as the 'fastest typist in Kerala', George remained Rajiv's eyes and ears while his master was alive.

Rajiv's office in 24 Akbar Road was guarded on both sides by the offices of Sitaram Kesri and C.M. Stephen. But even the both of them could only meet Rajiv by prior appointment. Rajiv's 24 Akbar Road office was out of bounds for Congress ministers and AICC

functionaries, unless V. George granted them an audience.

But unlike Yashpal Kapoor or Dhawan, who served as personal assistants to Indira and used their skill at shorthand as their path to personal power, George remained down-to-earth and humble. George remained fiercely loyal to Rajiv's widow, Sonia, who used him for a long time as a personal assistant, though he was marginalized later. Between 1998 and 2002, George had unlimited access to Sonia. Anybody seeking an audience with her, no matter how important, had to meet George first.

George served at 24 Akbar Road, too, while Rajiv and Sonia served as party chiefs. George believed that he could be successful in his job only by maintaining a low profile and remaining uninterested in power play. After Rajiv's assassination in 1991, when Sonia declined to take charge of the party, George remained a permanent fixture at her 10 Janpath residence. Many years earlier, in 1977, when his boss at the time, AICC secretary Margaret Alva, had abandoned Indira, George declined to approve of Alva's defection. He went to Indira and Sanjay, requesting them to avail of his services. Sanjay took a liking to George and he would often summon him to 12 Willingdon Crescent, where Rajiv and Sonia often saw him taking down notes or listening attentively to Sanjay.

According to *India Today*, (30 March 1998) in terms of loyalty to the Gandhi family, George stood much taller than anyone else in that league. Predecessors such as M.O. Mathai, who had served as a powerful personal assistant to Jawaharlal Nehru, were not as true to their salt. Mathai wrote a sleazy autobiography in the 1970s, while Dhawan lost Rajiv's trust after Indira's assassination. But George remained the ultimate Mr Faithful, who constantly spurned Narasimha Rao's overtures and lucrative offers to take up a political position in the party.

Vijay Dhar was the son of D.P. Dhar, a member of Indira's inner circle of advisors. Rajiv's office used to be an alternative durbar, where regional satraps, warring ministers, industrialists, scientists and senior bureaucrats visited regularly.

In his third office at 2A Motilal Nehru Marg, Rajiv had with him schoolfriend Arun Singh, who had given up his job at Reckitt and Colman, makers of Cherry Blossom boot polish, and cousin Arun Nehru, who used to work with paint manufacturer Jensen and Nicholson. Arun Nehru was Rajiv's third cousin and a trustee of the Sanjay Gandhi Memorial Trust. He soon became famous for his acerbic disposition and for being Rajiv Gandhi's front man.

The office functioned as a think-tank and focused on policy-oriented research. Rajiv's party colleagues viewed the Motilal Nehru

Marg bungalow as a sort of alternate power centre and a rival to 24 Akbar Road. In subsequent years, 24 Akbar Road had to tolerate many rivals, which came up variously, at 99 South Avenue, 80 Lodhi Estate and 15 Gurudwara Rakabganj Road. Unlike at the party office, the entry of party leaders, media and others was restricted at these places. There was always a veil of secrecy also about these 'work stations'. But according to those who functioned from these houses, Rajiv and the others preferred them because they had a better work atmosphere, employed a more business management-like approach, and were conspicuous by the absence of hangers-on and idle talk.

Indira herself acted cautiously about them. She appeared indulgent, but declined to accept the many recommendations made by these management gurus. She insisted that all official party work such as CWC meetings and poll preparations be conducted at 24 Akbar Road. Rajiv, too, accorded due importance to the party office. Many a time, he could be seen strolling around on the lush green lawns there, holding court. Surrounded by a ring of agile security guards, Rajiv would summon an individual or group to him, and within a few minutes, he would signal to George, Dhawan or Fotedar, who were standing at a distance, to take down instructions.

Rajiv tried to bring some element of discipline to the party office, too. He insisted on giving appointments to meet people. Gufran recalled how he once saw an anxious Kamal Nath pleading with the 24 Akbar Road securitymen to let him in, but the guards declined, saying that Nath did not have a prior appointment. Gufran, who had been given an appointment, requested Rajiv to accommodate Nath from his own share of time.

Interestingly, George, Dhawan and the burly Fotedar did not get along too well with each other. While on their guard, they also remained aloof with the Congress leaders. Most often, their response towards a particular party leader mirrored Rajiv's reaction to him. If Rajiv greeted or hugged a visiting leader, George, Dhawan and Fotedar would also show him warmth and affection. If Rajiv chided or looked annoyed with a visitor, the palace guards would give him snide looks or express their inability to arrange a private meeting. Thus, Rajiv's open durbar was often a good barometer of the political equations in the party.

While Rajiv focused on the party and policy matters, Indira got more involved in the Punjab problem. In 1966, she had lobbied hard to create the Sikh majority state along linguistic lines, a move that her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, had opposed in his lifetime. Over the years, separatists had worked on the plank of an independent state, while the regional Akali Dal had dithered on upholding the Indian Constitution

and its values. Indira tried to prop up Giani Zail Singh, a Sanjay protégé, to counter the Akalis, who picked on a radical preacher, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, to neutralize the conservative Akalis.

Bhindranwale succeeded in splitting the Akali votes and the Congress won in Punjab in 1980, but by then, the orthodox Bhindranwale had tasted power. He began a campaign to highlight how Delhi had been insensitive to the identity of the Sikhs. An orgy of violence broke out and Bhindranwale took refuge in the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs, calling for open secession from India and the creation of Khalistan, a separate Sikh state.

Indira was far from impressed. When gangs of killers on motorcycles began shooting moderate Sikhs and innocent people, she lost patience and summoned the top army brass including then army chief, Arun Sridhar Vaidya. The then head of Western Command, General Krishnaswami Sundarji, was given the responsibility of evicting Bhindranwale from the Golden Temple without causing damage to the holy shrine. A Sikh army officer, Maj. General Kuldip Singh Brar, led the ninth division. Before the actual operation began, Sundarji, however, presented a grim picture, pointing to secret aerial pictures that showed that Bhindranwale had barricaded all the windows, doors and offices of the shrine with bricks and sandbags. He also shared the information that Bhindranwale's supporters had smuggled in a huge cache of arms and ammunition.

For some inexplicable reason, Indira kept Zail Singh, who was then the president of India, in the dark about the army mission to flush Bhindranwale out of the Golden Temple. Operation Blue Star saw twenty-four hours of fierce gun battle on 5 June 1984 and resulted in the death of seven hundred and twelve extremists. The operation was successful in that it killed the bulk of the separatists, but the army failed to prevent the near-complete destruction of Harmandir Sahib and the Akal Takht.

Zail Singh visited the Golden Temple on 8 June 1984 and wept like a child, saying: 'The complex looks like it has been bombed from an aeroplane.' (Tarlochan Singh, Zail Singh's secretary, speaking in an interview to Brook Associates, 30 April 1996.) But his sense of outrage made no impact on the Sikh clergy, which excommunicated both him and Buta Singh.

Blood-curdling threats ensued against Indira and her family. The prime minister was specifically asked to remove the Sikh guards from her personal security. But Nehru's daughter refused, saying, 'Are we not secular?' Some of Indira's best friends, including Teji Bachchan, actor Amitabh Bachchan's mother, were Sikhs.

Author Marie Seton was in India during that period and felt that

the prime minister was exhausted after Operation Blue Star. 'She could no longer respond to challenges – always her strongest point. This she could always do. She could always improvise. Now she was retreating from communication. She always had moods like this. She would describe it as being stinking. She would say, "I am stinking now, right all the way through."' (*The Sunday Times*, 4 November 1984.)

31 October 1984 dawned just like any other day at the prime minister's Safdarjung road residence. Young Rahul and Priyanka kissed their grandmother goodbye without the faintest idea that they would be seeing her for the last time or indeed that it was going to be their last day in St. Columba's and Convent of Jesus & Mary schools respectively.

The children however did notice that Indira held them tighter than usual that morning, for death had been preying on the prime minister's mind for a while now. She had shared with her close associates that she had been getting dreams that were both disturbing and strangely serene. That day, while hugging Rahul, barely fourteen at the time, Indira had whispered in his ear, telling him to take charge of things in the case of any 'unlikely eventuality'. This was not the first time that Indira had spoken about her death to her grandson. A few days earlier, she had told him about her preferred funeral arrangements, telling him she had lived her life. She had also given him in writing that if she died a violent death, then the violence would be in the thoughts of the assassin, not in her death. 'For no hate is dark enough to overshadow the extent of my love for the people and my country, no force is strong enough to divert me from that purpose and my endeavour to take this country forward.' (Frank, Katherine, *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, HarperCollins, London, 2001.)

Having seen off her grandchildren and taken a light breakfast, Indira was walking towards 1 Akbar Road, to the adjoining bungalow that served as her office. Renowed actor and filmmaker Peter Ustinov was waiting to interview her with his crew from an Irish TV network. Ustinov remembers looking at his watch and wondering why the normally punctual prime minister was late by 12 minutes; their meeting had been scheduled for 9 a.m.

Draped in a mustard yellow and block bordered cotton sari, Indira Gandhi finally walked through the picket gate acknowledging the greetings of a turbaned security guard with a nod and a smile. As she smiled back at him, the man who was supposed to protect her trained his gun on her. Attendant Narain Singh, who was holding an umbrella over her, threw the umbrella in fright, shouting for help. But it was

too late. Thirty-one bullets had been pumped into the 66-year-old leader's body before the Indo-Tibetan Border Force guards could move a muscle. In seconds, assassin Beant was joined by his comrade Satwant Singh who pumped more bullets from his gun into an already inert prime minister.

Indira has been advised by the Central Intelligence Bureau to remove her Sikh guards and use a bulletproof vest. But the prime minister had emphatically declined the first suggestion on the grounds that removing the guards on the basis of their religious identity went against everything she stood for and was an insult to the secular fabric of the country. And she dismissed the second suggestion saying she found wearing a heavy bulletproof jacket both unnecessary and cumbersome. In fact, a few weeks prior to her assassination, Indira had rather proudly pointed at Beant Singh, saying: 'When I have Sikhs like him around me, then I do not need to fear anything.'

Indira, however, did have an obsessive fear of her family being harmed. P.C. Alexander, who served as her secretary, recalls:

'From June 1984, she lived with a dreadful thought. She kept repeating that there was a plot to kidnap the children. Nothing I said could allay her fears.' (Kidwai, Rasheed, *Sonia: A Biography,* Penguin, 2009.)

Sonia was having a bath when the gunfire shots were heard. At first she mistook them for some sort of firecrackers but then it struck her that Diwali had been a while ago. Sonia then ran out of the bath, screaming, 'Mummy, Mummy!'

Still in her bath gown, Sonia leapt into the car with her mother-in-law, cradling Indira's head in her lap as the white Ambassador tore through the three-kilometre distance to Delhi's All India Medical Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS). Indira was dead on arrival, but the doctors laboured for hours to revive her, giving her uninterrupted blood transfusions.

When Arun Nehru arrived at AIIMS, he saw Sonia hysterical with fear for the lives of her children, Rahul and Priyanka. She kept telling Arun that Indira had always feared a replay of what had happened to Mujib-ur-Rahman, the towering Bangladeshi leader, three generations of whose family had been wiped out by assassins, the only surviving member, his daughter Hasina. When Arun reached Safdarjung Road, he was stunned to see that there was not a single security guard to protect Rahul and Priyanka. Arun brought them back from school and sent them to Teji Bachchan's Gulmohar Park house for safety. Priyanka was close to Teji and has said in recent interviews that she owes her facility in Hindi to Teji's influence, and that she has read some of the writings of Dr Harivansh Rai Bachchan, Amitabh's father.

Rajiv was in Kolaghat in West Bengal on a pre-election tour when he learnt about the assassination 'attempt'. Rajiv's first reaction was to want to know whether Indira was alive. But the low-level Intelligence Bureau officials with him neither confirmed nor denied anything that Rajiv kept asking. They simply repeated that they had no information except that an attempt had been made on Indira Gandhi's life. Rajiv climbed into the driver's seat of a jeep and raced towards Calcutta. Reaching there, he saw a tense Jyoti Basu, chief minister of Bengal, and a worried Siddhartha Shankar Ray. But they too did not confirm Indira's death, only saying she was being operated upon at AIIMS.

Displaying nerves of steel – and a pilot's reflexes – Rajiv entered the cockpit on the flight back to Delhi and switched on the pilot's radio set, which confirmed Indira's death, quoting the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Pranab Mukherjee, who was finance minister and unofficial number two in the Indira cabinet, was with him on the flight.

Apparently, one version has it that, overwhelmed by grief, Pranab broke down in the aircraft's toilet. Because his eyes were red and bloodshot Pranab chose to sit at the rear of the craft. But his opponents within the Congress used this as evidence of his 'plotting and scheming' against Rajiv. Another version claimed that when Rajiv posed a 'theoretical question' about the 'care-taker prime minister', Pranab had emphasized on 'seniority' – a remark that was later used as suggestive of his desire to grab the office of the prime minister.

P.C. Alexander's account in his book *Through the Corridors of Power: An Insider's Story* (HarperCollins India, 2004) claims that Pranab Mukherjee had given instant assent to his suggestion that Rajiv should be sworn in instead of an interim prime minister. Alexander wrote: 'A group of individuals, with malicious intent, later spread a canard that Pranab Mukherjee had staked his claim to be sworn in as interim PM and had to be persuaded with great difficulty to withdraw his claim. The obvious objective was to create discord between Rajiv Gandhi and Pranab Mukherjee. But I should record here the true fact that Pranab Mukherjee had readily endorsed the suggestion I made to him.'

On reaching Delhi, Rajiv went directly from Palam to AIIMS, where a weeping Sonia awaited him. On seeing his wife, Rajiv broke down too, but regained his composure when P.C. Alexander patted him on his shoulder. Alexander recalled the poignant moment:

'Anguish was written all over his face. Rajiv gently clasped Sonia's hand and talked to her slowly and intimately. Tears were rolling down her cheeks and she ardently pleaded with him not to agree to be the prime minister. Rajiv was kissing her forehead and trying to convince her he had to accept the office as it was his duty to do so in that hour

of grave crisis.' (Alexander, P.C., *My Years with Indira Gandhi*, Vision Books, New Delhi, 1991.)

Alexander said he had to literally 'tear him away from Sonia…'

President Giani Zail Singh was away in Sana'a, Yemen, when he received the call from Delhi informing him of Indira's assassination and asking him to return immediately. Zail Singh later claimed that he decided to appoint Rajiv as the next prime minister without consulting anyone: 'He had always had a clean image, his age was in his favour and I thought at the time he was intelligent.'

Zail Singh's relations with Rajiv turned sour two years after Rajiv Gandhi became prime minister. Post retirement, Zail Singh was very bitter about this turn of events saying that his perception of Rajiv changed once Indira's son became prime minister. But till the time he died, Zail Singh insisted that he had chosen Rajiv as prime minister to honour Indira's wishes:

'I knew her mind and that is what she wanted, though we had not discussed it specifically. I just knew her mind.' (Alexander. P.C., *Through the Corridors of Power: An Insider's Story,* HarperCollins India, 2004.)

On his part, Rajiv said he had never once entertained the idea of becoming prime minister of India when he returned from Kolaghat to AIIMS. The idea did not occur to him till R.K. Dhawan, Balram Jakhar and Alexander cornered him at AIIMS. 'I was not happy. I talked with Sonia and she was totally unhappy. However, we discussed it and weighed all the pros and cons and, finally, we decided to accept it.'

While Indira's body lay in state at Teen Murti House, the crowds outside waited restlessly for a chance to see her mortal remains. The people were agitated and chants of '*Khoon ka badla khoon'* (blood for blood!) rent the air. The crowd grew more and more enraged as the hours went by and suddenly it went amok. Blood flowed through the streets of Delhi, which had not seen as bad a massacre since Nadir Shah's invasion. Within the span of three days, more than 2500 people were killed, many of them mercilessly burnt alive. Whatever Rajiv may have felt privately about the anti-Sikh riots of 1984, his sole public reference to it, though oblique, has entered the annals of infamy for its sheer cynicism:

'When a giant tree falls, the mother earth below shakes.'

In his grief, Rajiv failed to exercise both his moral authority and his political powers to redress the deep injuries of 1984. There was no courageous leader in the present day Congress who could emulate Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, who had both risked their own lives to quell the rioters in 1947.

The name of Indira's close aide, R.K. Dhawan, came under a cloud

when a commission of inquiry under Retired Justice Thakkar recommended that: 'the central government should seriously consider the question of appropriate agencies to investigate the matter as regards the involvement of R.K. Dhawan, the then special assistant to the former prime minister,' in the assassination. The report was tabled in Parliament on 27 March 1989, after it was 'leaked' to the press.

Dhawan joined Indira's staff in 1962 and stayed with her till the end. Many people came and went, including the likes of P.N. Haksar, P.N. Dhar and R.N. Rao. Rajiv Gandhi and the Congress decided to relegate the Thakkar report to the archives. Dhawan was given a clean chit. Dhawan himself denied the allegation vehemently and kept insisting that his shirt had been stained with Indira's blood.

Explaining the sequence of events that lead to her death, Dhawan said that usually Indira held a durbar for visitors from all over the country at her residence, 1 Safdarjung Road, at 8 a.m. every day. But it was a norm that whenever she returned from a trip in the evening, the next morning's durbar was cancelled. It had been suggested to Indira that she cancel her morning appointment with Peter Ustinov and rest instead, but she had insisted on continuing with the appointment because Ustinov had already recorded a part of the film he was making during her Orissa tour.

When Dhawan reached 1 Safdarjung Road at 8 a.m. on 31 October 1984, Indira was getting her hair styled. Apparently, she was very particular about personal grooming. So much so that Dhawan would often indicate to her if a hair was out of place by placing his hand on his own hair. Indira had planned a dinner for Princess Anne that evening at her residence. She instructed Dhawan on a few specifics about the guest list. 'I still have the page on which I took her last orders,' recalled Dhawan. ('That Fateful Day of October 31st, 1984, *The Week Magazine*, 2 November 2009.)

By 9 a.m., Indira was ready for Ustinov's shoot and she started walking towards the wicket gate connecting 1 Safdarjung Road with 1 Akbar Road. As usual, Dhawan said, he was a few steps behind her. She was such a brisk walker that it was sometimes tough keeping up. As they walked to the venue, a waiter bearing cups and saucers on a tray passed by. She stopped and asked the waiter where he was taking the tray. The waiter said Ustinov had asked for a tea-set to be placed before her during the interview. She immediately sent back the tea-set, instructing the waiter to fetch the 'special' one.

As soon as she reached the wicket gate, she folded her hands in a namaste to the guards. Dhawan said he saw Beant Singh raise his gun and shoot at her. Even as she fell, Satwant Singh started firing his Sten gun at her fallen body. She was not even standing when Satwant fired

at her.

Dhawan said that though he could see what was happening, he went momentarily cold: ‘I still shudder to remember what I saw. As I was gathering my wits about me Beant said in Punjabi: “We have done what we had to do. Now you can do what you have to.”’

On the thirteenth day after Indira’s death, Rajiv addressed the nation on television. It was his first policy speech. Rajiv told his countrymen, in his soft voice, ‘Together, we will build India of the twenty-first century.’ The speech, which focused on science, technology and self-reliance, revealed Rajiv’s outlook on economic liberalization, or what he called ‘generating surpluses for investment’.

Next, Rajiv announced the general elections, which eventually took place between 24 and 27 December 1984. There was a complete wave in his favour, with the Congress winning 415 of the 543 Lok Sabha seats, a tally that his mother and grandfather had never achieved. Riding on the sympathy wave of Indira’s assassination, it was also a personal triumph for Rajiv. He travelled more than fifty thousand kilometres by car, helicopter and aeroplane in twenty-five days. *India Today* showered him with lavish praise, ‘The election results have demolished the myth of a political novice, of a soft pilot turned politician being manipulated by weightier personalities.’

Time Magazine dubbed the result of the election ‘a mandate for change, for cleaning up, and for efficiency’ (*Time Magazine*, 7 January 1985). *Newsweek* (17 June 1985) likened the handsome Rajiv to John F. Kennedy.

chapter four

Mr Clean

The new prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, turned his focus on 24 Akbar Road and to cleaning up the political system. The young prime minister pledged to reform the electoral system and moved a pathbreaking bill to provide for the expulsion of elected representatives who changed parties. The new law said that if an MP or MLA defected, he would lose the right to represent the constituency unless more than one-third of his party was involved in the defection. The attempt was landmark in the sense that the Congress itself had been guilty of engineering defections in a number of states such as Jammu and Kashmir, Haryana and Andhra Pradesh.

In spite of pressure to focus more on governance, Rajiv tried to reform the Congress. He accepted candidly that as an organization, the Congress had become a party preoccupied with governance rather than social transformation. A number of in-house party papers were prepared by a core team consisting of seasoned party leader P.V. Narasimha Rao, technocrat Arun Singh and bureaucrat Gopi Arora. Rajiv went through each document minutely, offering suggestions and additions to clean up the party and compile a vision document as per his understanding and instincts.

On 28 December 1985 at Mumbai's Brabourne Stadium, on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the formation of the Indian National Congress, Rajiv spoke his heart out. Addressing a crowd of more than a thousand AICC delegates, MPs and prominent party-men, he described the gathering as historic.

At the meet, Rajiv dropped a bombshell on the Congress, when he launched one of the boldest initiatives launched by any Congress president. He squarely attacked the 'brokers of power and influence', whom he alleged rode on the backs of millions of ordinary party-workers. Recalling the contribution of several distinguished Congressmen before him, he said:

'There is no rest for us. As Jawaharlal Nehru had said, "We cannot rest, for rest is betrayal of those who have gone and, in going, handed the torch of freedom to us to keep alight; it is betrayal of the cause we have espoused and the pledge we have taken; it is betrayal of the millions who never rest." We cannot rest.'

Asking the party leaders what they had done with the legacy of

their great leaders, Rajiv said:

'To answer this question, I must delve into my own political experience, short though it is. When I started my political work, it was only with the motive of being by the side of my mother. She bore with stoic fortitude the irreparable loss of a son who had been a tower of strength. She gave me no directions, no formulae, no prescriptions. She just said, "Understand the real India, its people, its problems." So I plunged into work. Millions of faces in varying moods of joy and sorrow, of eager expectation, of triumph and defeat filled my being, till they merged into the face of Mother India, proud, defiant, confident, but also full of sad perplexity. Always, the unspoken question haunting her face: Whither India?

'I was exhilarated by what had been achieved in the short period since independence. I was also saddened by what might have been but was not, because of weaknesses in government and in the party. I kept my counsel to myself, as I was an apprentice in the great school of politics.'

Rajiv said that after two years of incessant travelling, meeting people, reading and reflection, he felt he could share his perceptions with Indira. In his speech at the Congress centenary in Bombay in 1985, he said:

'Listening to me, she thought I had gained some understanding of the complexities of our society. And then she began to unburden herself. She spoke of India's enduring strength and of her hopes for India, but also of her apprehensions and anxieties. She analysed with clinical precision how the entire system had been weakened from within, how the party had once again been infiltrated by vested interests who would not allow us to move, how patronage and graft had affected the national institutional framework, how nationalism and patriotism had ebbed, how the pettiness and selfishness of persons in political positions had ruptured the social fabric.'

Rajiv asked Congress persons to introspect. His pronouncements are relevant even today:

'We proclaim to celebrate the unity of India. It is a fact of transcending significance. But is it not also a fact that most of us, in our daily lives, do not think of ourselves as Indians? We see ourselves as Hindus, Muslims or Christians, or Malayalis, Maharashtrians or Bengalis. Worse, we think of ourselves as Brahmins, Thakurs, Jats, Yadavs, and so on and so forth. And we shed blood to uphold our narrow and selfish denominations. We are imprisoned by the narrow, domestic walls of religion, language, caste and region, blocking out the clear view of a resurgent nation. Political parties, state governments and social organizations promote policies, programmes and ideologies, which divide brother from brother and sister from

sister. Bonds of fraternity and solidarity yield to the onslaughts of meanness of mind and spirit. Is this the India for which Mahatma Gandhi and Indira Gandhi sacrificed their lives?'

Rajiv came down heavily on self-seeking cliques and the feudal oligarchy, saying:

'We have looked at others. Now let us look at ourselves. What has become of our great organization? Instead of a party that fired the imagination of the masses throughout the length and breadth of India, we have shrunk, losing touch with the toiling millions. It is not a question of victories and defeats in elections. For a democratic party, victories and defeats are part of its continuing political existence. But what does matter is whether or not we work among the masses, whether or not we are in tune with their struggles, their hopes and aspirations. We are a party of social transformation, but in our preoccupation with governance, we are drifting away from the people. Thereby, we have weakened ourselves and fallen prey to the ills that the loss of invigorating mass contact brings.

'Millions of ordinary Congress workers throughout the country are full of enthusiasm for Congress policies and programmes. But they are handicapped, for on their backs ride the brokers of power and influence, who dispense patronage to convert a mass movement into a feudal oligarchy. They are self-perpetuating cliques that thrive by invoking the slogans of caste and religion and by enmeshing the living body of the Congress.'

Rajiv added that the masses meant nothing to such people. They were reducing the Congress organization to a shell from which the spirit of service and sacrifice had been emptied.

As many on the dais listened in silence, Rajiv continued: 'We talk of the high principles and lofty ideals needed to build a strong and prosperous India. But we obey no discipline, no rule, follow no principle of public weal. Corruption is not only *tolerated*, but even regarded as the hallmark of leadership. Flagrant contradictions between what we say and what we do have become our way of life. At every step, our aims and actions conflict. At every stage, our private self crushes our social commitment. As action has diverged from precept, the ideology of the Congress has acquired the status of an heirloom, to be polished and brought out on special occasions. It must be a living force to animate the Congress workers in their day to day activity. Our ideology of nationalism, secularism, democracy and socialism is the only relevant ideology for our great country. But we are forgetting that we must take it to the masses, interpret its content in changing circumstances, and defend it against the attacks of our opponents.'

Rajiv said the revitalization of the Congress organization was a

historical necessity as there was no other political party capable of defending the unity and integrity of the country. Describing the Congress as the custodian of the national will and the sentinel of India's freedom and unity, he expressed the hope that the party would be soon reorganized and revitalized.

Spelling out his charter for the future, the young prime minister pronounced:

'The war on corruption will go on without let or hindrance. The country needs a clean social and political environment and the Congress is determined to give it. Any denial of justice to the poor and the weak is in itself a crime. Our judicial institutions and legal systems have to be streamlined and strengthened. Sooner, rather than later. We shall put our best brains to work on this problem. Our administrative machinery is cumbersome, archaic and alien to the needs and aspirations of the people. It has successfully resisted the imperative of change. It must learn to serve the people. It must become accountable for results. We need structural changes at all levels. We shall have them.'

He urged the Congress leaders to change their lifestyles and the Congress ministers, MPs, MLAs, party functionaries and leaders at all levels to lead by example.

For many, Rajiv's Mumbai speech was a candid criticism of how the party had been run by his mother and brother. By promising to break the nexus between the political party and vested interests, Rajiv had declared an ideological war of sorts on those who were exploiting the poor in the name of religion and caste. He had also openly expressed his desire to purge the party of the decay that had accumulated over the decades. More significantly, Rajiv had promised to 'cleanse the party and the nation'.

But change was not that easy to ring in. Rajiv followed up on his speech by appointing Arjun Singh vice-president of the Congress. The appointment failed to bring about any sweeping change as Arjun himself turned out to be a politician among politicians. In the process, Rajiv achieved the dubious success of upsetting Congress veteran Kamalapati Tripathi, who was functioning as president of the party and disliked Rajiv's attempts at modernization.

Tripathi felt threatened by Arjun Singh's appointment. He promptly shot off a letter to Rajiv, which was selectively leaked to the media to ensure that a wider debate was triggered in public. Questioning Rajiv's call for reforms and internal elections, Tripathi raised questions about why the leadership had lost the assembly polls and why 'professionals', whom, he observed, were 'good for nothing', had been brought into the party. Tripathi and many other senior

Congress members were particularly cut up about the rise of Arun Nehru, who was from Motilal Nehru's elder brother, Nandlal's side of the family; a family that had also played a significant role in the freedom struggle.

Arun's grandmother, Uma, had served three terms as MP. Rajiv appointed Arun Nehru AICC general secretary because he preferred to work and take decisions in the corporate style. Arun did not like the atmosphere at 24 Akbar Road, nor did he appreciate the Congress's tendency to look for consensus and keep decisions on hold. His attempt was to become the first among equals among the AICC general secretaries and he had scant regard for seniority.

Tripathi's tirade contained more ammunition in the form of blaming Rajiv for the rapid disintegration of the party at various levels, the introduction of economic reforms, which, he felt, were aimed at favouring the rich, and rushing to sign accords in Punjab and Assam without weighing their wider implications.

Tripathi appeared hurt by Rajiv's references to 'power brokers' in the party. He termed it an indication of disrespect for himself and pointed out that in 1978, when most of the party's leaders had left it, he, a founder member of Indira's Congress, had never faltered on the issue of loyalty.

Tripathi subsequently resigned as working president of the party. His exit led to a whisper campaign in the party that Rajiv had first sidelined all those loyal to Sanjay and then confronted all those who regarded themselves as Indira loyalists. But for most Congressmen of that era, Tripathi's resignation was a victory for Rajiv over the 'old guard'. Tripathi did not quit the Congress, but slowly lapsed into oblivion till his death in 1990.

Tripathi was remembered at 24 Akbar Road after a gap of eighteen years in 2008, when the Sonia-led Congress decided to organize a function to commemorate his hundred and third birth anniversary. Sonia, Manmohan Singh, Pranab Mukherjee, Karan Singh, Devendra Dwivedi and Mohsina Kidwai showered lavish praise on Tripathi, who had been punished for speaking out against Rajiv in 1986. In Congress circles, the AICC's move to remember Tripathi was seen as the party's attempt to consolidate the Brahmin votes in Uttar Pradesh. Rahul Gandhi was trying revive the party's upper-caste votebank in that state, and win back its traditional Brahmin voters, who had shifted to either the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).

In 1986, Arjun Singh had failed to make any headway in either reforming the party or holding party polls. His ten-month tenure as Congress vice-president was disastrous in the sense that the former

Madhya Pradesh chief minister himself became a victim of the intrigues taking place at 24 Akbar Road. Arjun's abrupt and unexplained departure put into question Rajiv's own commitment, as declared in Mumbai. For many, it was an indication of Rajiv's tendency to vacillate on important initiatives. The truth of the matter was that Rajiv's intentions were genuine, but as his political naivete enmeshed him further and further in a web, he began falling back on the 'old guard' and in the hands of the same 'powerbrokers' whom he had passionately called to weed out. Dhawan was back in the party and began acting as Rajiv's troubleshooter. By the time the 1989 elections were announced, 24 Akbar Road was packed with leaders whom Rajiv had earlier condemned roundly and promised to purge from the party.

Rajiv's 'U-turn' was evident at the party meet at Maraimalai Nagar, near Chennai, held during 23–24 April 1988. There were no barbs aimed there at the party bosses. Instead, Rajiv said:

'The Congress is the only party with the poor and the oppressed… the only party that can protect India's independence, unity and integrity… and it is the only party of principles.' Rajiv did not explain to the AICC delegates why party polls had not been held or why he had not presented an 'action taken report' on what he had said in Mumbai three years ago.

According to Rajiv's biographer Nicholas Nugent, the Maraimalai Nagar meet showed that the wheel had turned full circle and Rajiv had become his mother's son, leading a party that, for all intents and purposes, was his own electoral vehicle. 'It seemed as if the Congress Party was back to normal after the aberration of Rajiv's Mumbai speech,' observed Nugent (Nugent, Nicholas, *Rajiv Gandhi: Son of a Dynasty*, BBC Books, London, 1990).

T.N. Kaul felt that while Rajiv's intentions were good when he said he wanted to get rid of power-brokers, his inexperience got in the way of his achieving his goal. 'The old gang in the party got round him and did not allow him really to come to grips with the people in the party.'

Many regarded Rajiv's tenure as a 'golden age'. The new computer policy was unveiled. Rajiv launched five ambitious technology missions. He worked out peace accords in Punjab, Assam and Mizoram. His motto was 'a computer in every school by the twenty-first century'. Sitaram Kesri and other traditional Congressmen used to mock him in private, wondering how 'auto-pilot' Rajiv could think of computers when there was no electricity in the villages or blackboards in schools. But Rajiv's vision was realized when India walked into the twenty-first century as a leader in computer software and the business process outsourcing (BPO) industry.

Rajiv excelled in the international theatre too, championing the cause of the Palestinians. He was bitterly opposed to the continuation of Apartheid both in terms of the denial of human justice and because of Gandhi's historic link with South Africa. Rajiv knew British prime minister Margaret Thatcher well but he, famously, crossed swords with her for her obnoxious support of Apartheid and racism.

At the meeting of the Commonwealth heads of states at Lyford Cay, Thatcher mocked Rajiv for demanding sanctions. She said:

'It has become a parrot cry: Sanctions! And they were thinking would not it be good, boys, if we put sanctions on South Africa. And I said, "Have you worked out what sanctions are? Do you not know if they work in South Africa, all the expansion of business will stop? You will throw hundreds of thousands and millions of people out of work."'

But Rajiv did not budge. The cumulative pressure at the Commonwealth meets in London and Vancouver paid off when democracy was finally established in South Africa and Nelson Mandela was released from prison. Mandela still acknowledges Rajiv and India's contribution in bringing about this historical change in South Africa.

One of Rajiv's lasting legacies was leading the country successfully in telecommunications. When Rajiv became prime minister, he appointed Sam Pitroda, a telecom engineer, inventor and entrepreneur, as advisor in the ministry of post and telegraph. Pitroda quickly set up the Centre for Development of Telematics (C-DOT). In the next few years, C-DOT developed cheap switches and rural automatic exchanges, which did not require air-conditioning. By 2000, C-DOT designs accounted for fourteen-and-a-half million lines – 48 per cent of the total switching capacity.

By March 2004, Pitroda's telecom mission had created a network of 1.52 million PCO/STD/ISD centres, which were run by small entrepreneurs and offered jobs to hundreds and thousands of people. Pitroda's expertise was not confined to telecom. He prepared a blueprint for the revival of the Congress, but Rajiv did not get the time to implement it. In 2009, Pitroda began helping Rahul Gandhi to fulfil some of Rajiv's dreams.

Everything appeared to be running smoothly till 16 April 1987, when the Swedish radio announced that millions of dollars had been paid in bribes to Indian politicians and bureaucrats by the Swedish arms company, Bofors, in connection with a contract for the sale of 155 mm howitzer guns.

Interestingly, the Swedish radio's main concern was not with India, but with Sweden, where Bofors had been at the centre of a

series of scandals. But Indian political parties, until now clueless about tackling Rajiv's twenty-first century 'let's build India' plank, seized the issue and demanded an explanation from the government.

According to noted journalist Vir Sanghvi, this was where Rajiv's inexperience showed and he paid a heavy price for it. An experienced prime minister would have said, 'We will investigate the matter.' But Rajiv went on to claim that not only had bribes not been paid, but that no commissions had been given because the deal had no agents. 'This was a silly thing to do because all his critics now had to do was to prove that commissions (not, in themselves, illegal) had been handed out. And sure enough, it turned out that, contrary to what it claimed, Bofors had paid commissions,' said Sanghvi, who had followed the Bofors case closely. (Sanghvi, Vir, 'Looking Back at the Bofors Scandal', Rediff.com, 23 September 1999.)

After eighteen years of legal run-ins and a probe that cost Rs 250 crore to sort out a Rs 64 crore scandal, the case that unseated Rajiv Gandhi collapsed on 31 May 2005, when the Delhi High Court acquitted the three Hinduja brothers in the Bofors payoff case and slammed the prosecution for wasting public money. Justice R.S. Sodhi said the prosecution had failed to substantiate its charges.

In Vir Sanghvi's assessment, throughout the Bofors debate, neither the BJP nor the Congress ever told the full story:

'For the Congress to say, "Look, the gun has performed so well in Kargil," was to miss the point. Of course, Bofors is a good gun – at that level, they all are – but that does not mean the deal was clean. Equally, for the BJP to act as though the Gandhi family's involvement was a matter of record was to overstate the case.' ('Looking Back at the Bofors Scandal', Rediff.com, 23 September 1999.)

Rajiv was defence minister when the Bofors deal was signed, but there were several others closely involved in the deal. Arun Singh, who later became minister of state for defence, was close to Sundarji. When the BJP came to power during 1998–2003, Arun Singh became part of the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government, but nobody questioned his role in the Bofors scandal. Likewise, there were several legitimate questions to be asked of Arun Nehru, who also joined the BJP later. But far from asking him anything, the BJP gave him a ticket to fight the elections.

Nehru–Gandhi family loyalist Mani Shankar Aiyar asked Soli Sorabjee, a leading lawyer and attorney general, to prove whether Quattrocchi was indeed a friend of Rajiv and Sonia Gandhi. In 2000, he asked Sorabjee to send for SPG records to ascertain the exact number of times Quattrocchi was received by the then prime minister at his offices in South Block, Parliament House and 7 Race Course Road.

Mani said: 'My information is: Not once. I would, therefore, urge the attorney general to ascertain the precise number of times Q and his wife, Maria, were waved through by the SPG to the Gandhi residence at 5 Race Course Road or that any member of the Gandhi family visited the Quattrocchis. Ditto for telephone calls between the PMO and the Quattrocchis.' ('Mani Talk', *India Today*, 4 May 1998.)

Sonia, who seldom responded to allegations and controversies surrounding her, chose to take on the Bofors spectre at the first press conference she addressed on 13 August 1999. When a reporter asked her about 'Q', Sonia became uncharacteristically belligerent and almost shouted back, 'My husband was crucified over the (Bofors) papers.' She added, 'They (the Vajpayee government) keep repeating that they would bring out the Bofors papers, but no such papers are forthcoming.'

Sonia went on, 'It suits the BJP to keep things hanging,' alleging that the BJP had sought to extract political advantage from the Bofors papers.

Sonia fielded questions at her maiden news conference with an aplomb that surprised even party colleagues. A picture of confidence, she shunned the practice of falling back on advisors and took on all the questions herself. Mixing aggression with spontaneity, she said that if her party was voted to power, it would take the Bofors probe to its 'logical and legal conclusion'.

Asked about her links with Quattrocchi, she said: 'The CBI has found him a suspect, but we have never seen papers telling us that he has done something that is not correct.' The Congress chief even lobbed a question at the media: 'Do you have some proof? Bring me the proof.'

The Bofors scandal took a heavy toll on Rajiv in more than one way. He lost his friendship with his childhood friend, Amitabh Bachchan. The Gandhis and the Bachchans have never spoken about the actual reason why their friendship soured, but common acquaintances blame it on personality clashes, ego tussles and one-upmanship amid failures and tragedies.

The 'split' has been painful for both sides. For Sonia, it is the loss of the first friend she made in India. Amit, as she affectionately addressed him, was the one who received her off the aeroplane at Palam Airport on the chilly winter morning of 13 January 1968. Her civil marriage to Rajiv Gandhi took place forty-three days later on 25 February. During this period, Sonia stayed at Amitabh's house with his mother, Teji Bachchan and father, Dr Harivansh Rai Bachchan.

Family friend Mohammad Yunus and Indira Gandhi's confidant, T.N. Kaul, had zeroed in on the Bachchans after Indira said she was

not keen on Sonia staying in a hotel or at her residence before the marriage. At that time, Amitabh was yet to become a superstar and Rajiv was a carefree soul. Along with Ajitabh 'Bunty' Bachchan and Sanjay Gandhi, Rajiv and Sonia were frequently spotted on the India Gate lawns, eating ice cream. Rajiv Gandhi had an old Lambretta scooter, which often had ignition problems. Invariably, either Sanjay or Amitabh had the 'honour' of pushing it for a few metres till it started.

The families were so close that when Rahul and Priyanka grew up, they addressed Amitabh as 'mamun', which is Avadhi for maternal uncle. When Rajiv was assassinated at Sriperumbudur, Amitabh was in London and Rahul in Boston. They landed in Delhi together from London. Amitabh then took charge of the funeral arrangements with Priyanka, while Rahul stayed at home, trying to console Sonia and accepting condolences.

In several interviews, (Mishra, Sumant, *Main Amitabh Bol Raha Hoon: In Candid Conversation*, Egmont, Mumbai, 2003) Amitabh has fondly recalled that his first meeting with Rajiv was when he was four years old and Rajiv, two:

'There was this fancy dress party on Bank Road (the Bachchans' residence in Allahabad). Rajiv Gandhi was two years old and had been dressed up as a freedom fighter. Ma says he messed up his pants. We were all such tiny kids then, absorbed in our little games, that it didn't seem such a big deal that Pandit Nehru's grandson was in our midst.

'He often visited me on the sets, like the time I was shooting for *Ganga Ki Saugandh* in Jaipur. He was extremely unobtrusive and would wait patiently till I completed my shots. His nature was such that he would never misuse his name or family connections. On the contrary, more often than not, he would not disclose his surname, fearing the distance it would create between him and the common man,' remembered Amitabh.

He said, 'The last time I met him before leaving for London was in Delhi on 8 May 1991. On the 20th, which was a Monday, the hearing of the Bofors case against a Swedish newspaper began in London. On the 21st, the judge summarized the case and, on the following Wednesday, the verdict was to be announced. At five o'clock UK time, we returned home after lunch. That's when we received the news of the horrific incident…

'My first reaction was of complete disbelief. The fact that something like this could actually happen was unthinkable. As humans, we find ourselves hoping that we will never be victims of such unspeakable tragedies… I was shocked for quite a while and remained numb and speechless. I am afraid I cannot describe it in words.'

Asked if he considered joining politics to assist Sonia, Amitabh said, 'By force of habit, I find myself totally involved in any work I take up and want to complete it at any cost. Now that I'm deciding to cut down on my films (this was in October 1992), people surmise that it is because I intend to join politics. Yes, Rajiv was a very dear friend. It is also true that I am one of Soniaji's genuine well-wishers and I'm close to her family. But how will my entering politics ease her concerns and her pains? And why should she need me or require my help? She is an extremely strong, sensible, competent person, fully capable of taking her own decisions. She is aware of what she should and should not do.'

In Khalid Mohammed's *To Be Or Not To Be,* (Saraswati Creations, Mumbai, 2002) Amitabh talked about the Gandhi– Bachchan family ties, and said:

'Rajiv and Sanjay studied in Doon School, Ajitabh and I were in Nainital… But our holidays fell around the same months. We'd hang out and swim every day at the pool of Rashtrapati Bhavan. The friendship continued. After school Rajiv went off to Cambridge. Whenever he would be back home, we'd get together and exchange notes… When he started flying, I'd go with him to provide ballast at the Flying Club of Delhi. I'd glide there for hours… Panditji died. Mrs Gandhi became PM and the family moved to 1 Safdarjung Road, which was close to our home at 13 Willingdon Crescent. Rajiv, Sanjay, Ajitabh and I formed a closely knit group of friends.'

By Amitabh's own admission, it was Rajiv and Sanjay who exposed him to avant-garde cinema at a young age through the European films that were specially screened for the Gandhi family at Rashtrapati Bhavan. 'Rajiv and Sanjay Gandhi and I would attend screenings of *The Cranes Are Flying* and Czech, Polish and Russian films, which often packed an anti-war message,' Amitabh recalled.

Actor Mehmood's biographer, Hanif Zaveri, has many interesting and anecdotal accounts of young Amitabh and Rajiv. When Amitabh was a struggling actor, Mehmood, the comedy king of that era, became his patron. Both Mehmood's brother, Anwar Ali, and sister, Zubaida, became close pals of Amitabh. In *Mehmood: A Man of Many Moods*, author Hanif Zaveri reminisces:

'Just before the release of *Bombay to Goa*, Amitabh had brought a very fair young friend to Mumbai. The friend had accompanied him from Delhi. Mehmood was on a high after taking Calmpose tablets, a drug to which he was addicted. Anwar introduced the young man to Mehmood, but in his state, he was unable to understand what was said. Mehmood took out five thousand rupees and handed them to Anwar to give to Amitabh's friend. A puzzled Anwar asked what the money was for. Mehmood said the young fellow was fairer and

smarter than Amitabh. He could become an international star. The money was the signing amount for taking the young man in Mehmood's next project.'

Anwar then had to reintroduce Amitabh's friend to Mehmood, stressing that he was Rajiv, son of the prime minister, Indira Gandhi. Mehmood quietly took the money back. Both Amitabh and Rajiv had a good laugh. Many years later, when Rajiv became prime minister, Amitabh acknowledged Mehmood's good judgement, saying that Rajiv was indeed an international star, but in the political arena, not on the silver screen. (Kidwai, Rasheed, *Sonia: A Biography*, Penguin, 2009.)

According to Amitabh's father, the late Dr Harivansh Rai Bachchan, the Gandhi–Bachchan connection went back to Anand Bhavan, the Nehru–Gandhi family home in Allahabad. Sarojini Naidu had invited Harivansh Rai and Teji to Anand Bhavan.

'This led to the beginning of a close and lifelong friendship between Teji and Indira, who was still unmarried. Mrs Naidu introduced the pair of us very dramatically as "the poet and the poem", a phrase which Indira was long to remember, alluding to it frequently when introducing Teji to foreign visitors,' recalled Harivansh Rai in his autobiography, *Dashdwaar Se Sopaan Tak* (Rajkamal & Sons, New Delhi, 2006).

In Khalid Mohammed's *To Be or Not To Be*, Amitabh elaborated further on this connection, linking the intercaste marriage between his parents with that of Indira and Feroze Gandhi:

'The very notion of a Sikh girl marrying a Kayasth wasn't acceptable to her father – my *nana* – at all. It was the first intercaste marriage for Allahabad. It was like the Feroze and Indira marriage in a way. There was something common, then, and that's how the friendship developed with the Nehrus. Sarojini Naidu introduced my father to Pandit Nehru. Ma was extremely beautiful. I'm told that Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit's daughters, Nayantara and Chandralekha, were very excited when they heard that Ma would be visiting them at Anand Bhavan. Ma was believed to be the epitome of beauty and *adab* from Lahore. Mrs Indira Gandhi, too, was very excited at the prospect of meeting her. Everyone dressed up for that occasion, perhaps with the intent of comparing fashions. Lahore in those days was considered the epicentre of fashion and culture.'

Some well-wishers of the Gandhis and Bachchans feel that politics cut short their tale of friendship. According to them, the first blow came when Rajiv Gandhi entered politics and 'requested' Amitabh to help him out. Amitabh had a disastrous stint in politics as Rajiv Gandhi was sucked into controversy after controversy – Bofors, Fairfax and the HDW deal. In some ways, Amitabh's parting with the Gandhi family significantly contributed to Rajiv's downfall in the Allahabad

Lok Sabha by-elections in 1987. It gave a fragmented Opposition the sense that together they could humble the Congress, which then held 413 seats in a 542-member Lok Sabha.

Amitabh's name figured in several scandals in which Rajiv was the principal character. Libel suits, allegations and counter-allegations followed, resulting in Amitabh quitting politics. That was much against Rajiv's wishes and, according to family friends and associates, against Sonia's, too.

At the launch party of his film, *Khuda Gawah*, in 1992 in a Delhi hotel, Amitabh turned to co-star Sridevi and called out: 'In *Khuda Gawah*, you were seeking villain Habibullah's head, here I have a real life Habibullah for you.'

The reference was to the 1968 Jammu and Kashmir cadre IAS officer, Wajahat Habibullah, who was present at the movie launch as a representative of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation. Amitabh then turned emotional, virtually in tears, narrating how Rajiv had gone out of his way to facilitate the shooting of *Khuda Gawah* in war-torn Afghanistan. Rajiv had spoken repeatedly to the then Afghan president, Najibullah, seeking his personal undertaking for Amitabh's safety. The film was ready in 1991, when Rajiv was still alive, but it was released only in 1992. Incidentally, Amitabh took a long break from films after this. (Kidwai, Rasheed, *Sonia: A Biography*, Penguin, 2009.)

But in the next few years, both sides broke the code of silence. Rumours and often unsubstantiated allegations of disputes over money and some fallout over matrimonial prospects between the Gandhi and Bachchan children grew louder, with both sides refusing to clearly confirm or deny them. Close family insiders from the two sides, however, deny these factors as responsible for the break.

In 1999, Ajitabh fell out with his wife Ramola, leading to a separation. While the Gandhis had virtually no links with Amitabh, Jaya or Ramola by then, they remained close to Ajitabh and his children.

10 Janpath insiders said Sonia had been deeply hurt by Amitabh's one-liner to a television channel that it was she who shut the door on him. Sonia was also put off by Jaya's tirade against the Gandhis in the Barabanki election rally in Uttar Pradesh. Jaya's remarks were attributed to her proximity to Amar Singh, who bears little love for Sonia. Political circles say it is this 'Amar effect' that may have done in the Bachchans. Jaya's outburst against the 'dynasty' became more strident after her son, Abhishek Bachchan, tasted success with his film, *Bunty Aur Babli*.

Amar, blamed as a 'spoiler', defends himself, pointing out that the Bachchan–Gandhi relationship dated back to a time when he was not even born. 'I have no authority or competence to comment on the ties of two great families. Only they are competent to comment on each other. All I know about Amitji is that he is a man of great dignity, depth and emotion and he's convinced that there's respect only for utility and no place for emotion.' (Quoted in *The Times of India,* 'What Went Wrong with Dosti No 1', 17 October 2004).

By July 2009, Amar had begun praising Sonia and regretted his past observations about her and Rahul Gandhi. He told a gathering at Garhmukteshwar, Ghaziabad, in March 2010 that he had criticized them while he was bound by the Samajwadi Party line. 'But now I can say she (Sonia) is the only woman in the world who has sacrificed the post of prime minister for the cause of the unity of the nation.' (Press Trust of India, 21 March 2010.)

While Amitabh's ties with the Gandhis hit an all-time low, his younger brother, Ajitabh, remained more circumspect in his relations with them. The importance of Ajitabh, or 'Bunty', in Amitabh's life has not been acknowledged to the outside world, except for some highly laudatory references in poet Harivansh Rai's autobiography. Those who know him suggest that Ajitabh is a very focused person, quick to spot areas of strength in others and encourage them towards their goals, as he did with his brother, as well as his friend in the 1970s – film actress Zeenat Aman. By her own admission, Zeenat says that it was Ajitabh who first suggested that she enter Hindi films.

Ajitabh's Achilles' heel is his family. On those occasions when his life has fallen apart, it is because he has not listened to his own instincts, but bowed to pressure from other members of his family, be it in business or family matters. Very early on, Harivansh Rai and Teji Bachchan's younger son decided he wanted to be a businessman, but first, he needed the necessary educational and professional experience, which he acquired by graduating with a first class honours degree in economics from St Stephen's College, University of Delhi. He then joined the famous shipping company, Shaw Wallace.

In 1984, after Indira Gandhi's assassination, the Bachchan brothers' world went into a churn. When Amitabh decided to join politics, since both Jaya and he were busy in Allahabad, it was decided that the family would move to Delhi and all the six children were put into school there. Ramola and Ajitabh moved into a farmhouse rented from Arun and Nina Singh. Rajiv and Sonia Gandhi had a wide group of associates and friends and, generally, there was not much overlap in social circles between them and the Bachchans, except in certain cases as with the Singhs and hotelier Lalit Suri and his wife, Jyotsna, who were also friends of the Bachchans.

In 1986, the Bachchan brothers became embroiled in the Bofors crisis. Ajitabh's name was implicated when the Swedish newspaper suggested that he was the holder of the famous 'sixth account'. The Swiss authorities refused his application for residency in the canton of Geneva.

The Gandhis and the Bachchans have been extremely tightlipped about what caused the differences between them. For years, on Delhi's Raisina Hill, which houses the country's politicians, word was that the two illustrious families fell out over money. But all those who know the Gandhis and the Bachchans discount this theory. According to them, the Bachchans' problems with ABCL may have aggravated and further strained their ties, but it was not the prime reason for the end of their friendship.

Family insiders on both sides say the Gandhi–Bachchan ties should be seen in the context of a more down-to-earth story of human failings. Moreover, in the tale of a friendship spread over nearly six decades, the bitterness forms just about one-sixth of their lives. There are too many accounts to narrate.

According to Gandhi family insider Nathu Ram (*Rajiv Gandhi: His Mind and Ideology,* Attar Chand, Gian Publishing House, 1991):

'I remember the days when Panditji (Nehru) moved to the Teen Murti House in New Delhi. There were simple quarters there then, not much of what's there now. The children, Rajiv and Sanjay, would come home for the holidays from Doon School. Bunty (Ajitabh) and Amitabh would come along to play with our children. So would Mohammed Yunus's son. After completing their studies, Rajiv joined Indian Airlines and Sanjay set up an automobile repair shop at Punjabi Bagh, Delhi. Rajiv and Sonia got married at the house on Safdarjung Road, New Delhi. We always used to call Sonia *bahurani*. Within a short while, she could speak fluent Hindi. She loved cooking *baingan ka bharta* (a grilled eggplant dish).

'After Sanjay's wedding, the children had separate quarters in the Safdarjung house. Rajiv was a good father. Whenever he was off duty, he would play with the children, as did his mother, or take them out on long drives. On their birthdays, he would shoot their pictures. Dinner was the only time when the entire family sat together. Rajiv was very fond of ice-cream; he would make it himself on the machine. Most days, he would wake up late. His mother would leave early and ask me to pass on messages. Sanjay was the snappy one, on the dot with appointments, planning the day. Rajiv used to have only Campa Cola, and no water, tea or coffee. Earlier, it was only Coca-Cola.'

Sonia recalled in an interview to *Dharmayug* in 1985:

'Mummy (Indira) had asked me to stay with the Bachchans, so that I could learn Indian customs and culture from close up. Slowly, I

came to learn a lot from that family. Teji Aunty is my second… no, my third mother. My first is my mother in Italy, the other was my mother-in-law, Mrs Indira Gandhi, the third is Teji Aunty. Amit and Bunty are my brothers.' She said that in those carefree days, Rajiv and she used to prefer not to discuss politics at all. Instead, the talk veered around business, music, art and, of course, flying. 'We used to get together with our friends from Cambridge, Sanjay's friends, Amit and Bunty. We would sit at home chatting, listening to music – just sitting around. Sometimes we'd go out for a dance, a movie, a picnic, a long drive. Deep Kaul, Arun Singh, Suman Dubey… we'd laugh and talk and enjoy ourselves.'

Sonia's description of Teji as her 'third mother' aptly described the core of the Gandhi–Bachchan family ties. When Teji died on 21 December 2007, the two families lost their last and most formidable link, spread over four generations, and, perhaps, the possibility of any rapprochement. Till her last breath, Teji remained a very special person for Sonia Gandhi and her family.

Teji was also one of Indira's closest friends. She never flaunted her proximity to the Nehru–Gandhi family, but once admitted to writer Uma Vasudev that she was present when Jawaharlal Nehru breathed his last. In Teji's own words, 'She (Indira) was suffering under intense shock as if the earth had slipped away from under her feet. But she… is so sincere and loyal and self-effacing that… she thinks of others even in the smallest detail. She was sitting in the room holding her dead father's hand, his body hadn't even grown cold; even so, she had this sense of the impersonal demand in the midst of despair… and she exclaimed to me, "Oh Teji, see that a doctor is available when Padma *mausi* comes!" And, a little later, asking me again to see that a flask of juice was put in *phuphi*'s room.' (Vasudev, Uma, *Indira Gandhi: Revolution in Restraint,* Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1974.)

In 1973, Indira appointed Teji a director of the Film Finance Corporation of India, which functioned under the chairmanship of B.K. Karanjia, the then editor of *Filmfare*. The main objective of the Film Finance Corporation of India, a government of India undertaking, was to finance the production of purposeful films of good quality with a view to improving the general standards of the medium. (Kidwai, Rasheed, *Sonia: A Biography*, Penguin, 2009.)

For most of the duration of the Emergency, the Gandhis and Bachchans were next door neighours. It was Sonia who had created a pathway between the two bungalows to make it easy for her and Teji to visit each other frequently. According to sources in both the Bachchan and Gandhi households, Sonia enjoyed close and cordial ties with Teji till she was taken ill.

Teji was a very strong woman. In an interview to *Society* magazine, Ramola, who later split up with Ajitabh, said, 'I would be a hypocrite if I said that it's been a romance all along. It's right when they say that only one woman can be a mistress of a house. I mean in a family with three women – and we're all strong women, mind you – there are bound to be moments of difference and disagreements, but I think you ought to know how to handle it.'

Even in the past, there had been minor skirmishes and spells of aloofness. The story from Sanjay Gandhi's side of the family is that, after the Emergency, when Indira was voted out of power, there was a proposal to invite the Bachchans to a public rally, which Teji reportedly declined, saying it would be detrimental to Amitabh's film career. Sanjay was said to be furious about this. On another occasion, Sanjay was reportedly upset when Amitabh did not show up to receive his friend at the airport, a job he used to greatly relish earlier. More than elder brother Rajiv, Sanjay had more open and informal ties with Amitabh. In fact, he had represented the Gandhi family when Amitabh married Jaya in 1973. Sanjay's son, Feroze Varun, claimed that the Bachchans made their return to the Gandhi household after Rajiv entered politics, months after Sanjay's death.

There was another incident that caused a bit of a rift between the two families. With a young, good-looking man like Rajiv as prime minister, many women reportedly made overtures to him. Among these, it is said, was a leading film actress, who wished to ensure an assembly ticket for her father in Tamil Nadu and flaunted her links with the Bachchans in the process. The image-conscious Gandhis were uncomfortable with the fact that the actress was using the name of their best friends. At this juncture, Sonia is said to have felt that bringing the Hindi film industry's morality into their friendship was extremely avoidable.

There was the issue of the Bachchans' obsession with astrology as well. After Rajiv's death, Sonia was understandably low and depressed. Instead of giving her emotional support, it is believed that she was bombarded with unwanted advice about her political future. When Congressmen were requesting her for a more active political role, a 'world class *janam kundli* (birth chart) was prepared, which told Sonia that her *kundli* was very weak in relation to leadership and a political future'.

As Amitabh had himself said once, the newer members of the two families could not understand the true nature of the Gandhi-Bachchan ties. Some resented the patronage factor, which went in favour of the Gandhis and which Amitabh and Ajitabh took for granted. A case in point was when Sonia visited London privately after Rajiv's death.

Some members of the Bachchan family, who were present there at the time, were reportedly very reluctant to accompany Sonia.

But the real breaking point came around the time of Priyanka's wedding on 18 February 1997; Amitabh's daughter, Shweta, was married a day earlier, on 17 February. Family insiders said Priyanka's wedding announcement was made much in advance, while Shweta's was a *chat mangni pat vivaah* with the engagement announced only in December 1996.

There were people who said that the date, 17 February, was chosen deliberately by the Bachchans, as if to cast a shadow over Priyanka's big day. There was much confusion among the common guests, with Lalit Suri and Amitabh himself having to rush to Delhi for Priyanka's early morning ceremony, after the late night celebrations in Mumbai. For the cynic, it was an attempt to hog the media limelight as the media was expected to pay more attention to Shweta's wedding, which had all the film stars in attendance.

At the time of Shweta's wedding, letters were sent to all the Bachchans' uninvited friends and social acquaintances, explaining that they had not been invited because it was Nikhil and Shweta's big day and they only wanted family and close friends present. Many in the Bachchans' social circle and in the film industry termed it a churlish act, but everybody kept mum because the letter was sent in Harivansh Rai Bachchan's name. Well-placed sources, who did not wish to be named, said the role of the wedding date row in souring the Gandhi–Bachchan ties could not be underestimated. Petty as it may sound, tempers were running high at the time and Sonia was lonely and hurt, which can be seen in the fact that no member of the Gandhi family attended Shweta's wedding.

According to political commentator Harish Khare, it was his friendship with Rajiv that gave Amitabh a political persona. Unlike M.G. Ramachandran or J. Jayalalitha, Amitabh was not willing to submit to the grind of a political apprenticeship. His relationship with Rajiv remained the only reason for the Bachchan phenomenon in Indian politics. Writing in *The Hindu* in 1995, Khare commented:

'Not much is known of Mr Bachchan's contribution to policy making or political innovations during the Rajiv regime; what, unfortunately, is known is that his name became embroiled in the Bofors controversy. Rightly or wrongly, he was seen as personifying the waywardness of the Rajiv regime. Maybe, when a correct and intimate appraisal of the Rajiv years is undertaken, he could be held responsible for many an aberration. The Bachchan presence in the Rajiv entourage transcended two individuals. The relationship came to symbolize a regime reeking of cronyism. The Bofors controversy was only an unfortunate expression of a mindset that regarded India as a

zamindari. After all, the Bachchans were at the centre of the beautiful set that delighted in a squander mania of the Festival of India variety.'

'Behind the razzle-dazzle of the beautiful set, the urge to cut corners remained untamed. Crony capitalism, under the aegis of a command economy, entrenched itself. After Rajiv's death, this beautiful set found life in India a bit inconvenient. Crony capitalism had produced its own crisis; rather than disciplining and reining in their crooked impulses, the governing elites' answer was to seek an alliance with the crooked among the international financiers and speculators. A man who made good in India, a man who became the mascot of the unity of "the Indian sentiment" in the memorable musical montage, *Mile Sur Mera Tumhara*, such a man found India stifling, cramping his style.

'Mr Bachchan became an NRI. Perhaps, an unwitting betrayal of a friend who had presided over the Indian state for nearly five years. Mr Bachchan's preference for an NRI status, with all the implications of divided loyalties and allegiance, was representative of a hypocritical elite.'

Khare, ex-press advisor to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, further wrote:

'Having first helped itself to public monies while all the time pretending to be doing a "public service", this elite cheerfully abandoned the motherland when things became ugly and frightening. The beautiful people simply could not stand the stench of Ayodhya, Surat, Ahmedabad and Mumbai. And now that the scene has changed, the people of style and elegance are back. Mr Bachchan is also back. Not as an actor, not as a politician, but as a self-confessed businessman. A few months ago, he had told an interviewer: "With the change in the country and the economy, and the boom in entertainment, I felt the need for a professional attitude towards the entertainment industry… I am no longer an individual, but a corporate entity. They have invested money in me as a brand. They can recover the money through whatever the brand can do: act, sing, do a concert, endorse a product."'

The Gandhi–Bachchan potboiler continued to stage several twists and imponderables in its script. In December 2009, the younger generation of Gandhis and Bachchans were seen together in public in New Delhi, leading to speculation about whether a rapprochement was on the cards. The occasion was an exhibition of the paintings of Ajitabh's daughter, Namrita, at Palette Art Gallery to commemorate Harivansh Rai Bachchan's *Madhushala*.

Priyanka was by Namrita's side for over an hour, along with husband Robert and son Raihan Rajeev, who, incidentally is a musician in the making. Namrita was seen patiently explaining her art

to them. There was considerable speculation in social circles about why Amitabh has been avoiding the idea of availing of niece Namrita's goodwill for a rapprochement with the Gandhis. The response from the Bachchan camp was that the actor was not too sure about the response of the Gandhis.

The Bachchan–Gandhi ties received another jolt in March 2010, when Amitabh chose to become the brand ambassador of the Gujarat government. He showered lavish praise on the state's controversial chief minister, Narendra Modi, who many civil rights activists considered responsible for alleged mismanagement and complicity in the 2002 Gujarat violence.

Amitabh defended his decision, insisting that as an apolitical entity, he was within his rights to side with a 'democratically elected' chief minister. But a closer scrutiny of Amitabh's life shows that since his very childhood, the actor has never been away from politics or politicians. It also explains why Congress leaders, including Sonia, felt outraged over his association with Modi. After all, the Bachchans' tale of friendship with the Nehru–Gandhis dates back to the Allahabad days. And the links between the two families had endured strong for several decades.

Amitabh's first break in Bollywood was in Abbas' *Saat Hindustani*, based on the liberation of Goa. Abbas was considered close to Indira, then prime minister, and there were whispers that she had put in a word for the struggling actor. But Abbas stoutly denied having acted at Indira's behest. Indira's close aide, Yashpal Kapoor, was extremely fond of Amitabh. Kapoor, more famous for toppling Opposition governments in various states, is said to have tried to get Amitabh into Delhi's prestigious St Stephen's College. For some reason, Amitabh did not join, preferring to study at Kirorimal College, but Ajitabh studied economics at St Stephen's.

Harivansh Rai, later to become a Rajya Sabha member, was requisitioned in the foreign office by Nehru's government, while Teji was made director of the Film Finance Corporation of India in 1973. This was around the time when Amitabh got married to Jaya. The guest list was extremely small, but Sanjay was on it, representing the Gandhis.

Then the Emergency happened. Amitabh, who was frequently seen in Sanjay's company, faced the media's wrath for supporting it. On 11 April 1976, Delhi hosted a function called 'Geeton Bhari Sham', ostensibly to raise money for Sanjay and Rukhsana Sultana's controversial family planning programme. Both Amitabh and Jaya were present in Sanjay's company.

Around the time when Indira's Emergency information and broadcasting minister, V.C. Shukla, was clamping down on violence in

Hindi films, came Ramesh Sippy's *Sholay*. Writers Salim–Javed and the Sippys were tense about whether the film would be passed by the Censor Board. Amitabh's association came in handy at this juncture and the otherwise intimidating Shukla cleared the film with minor cuts, including a change in the climax.

Throughout the twenty-one-month-long Emergency, Amitabh remained silent on the ban imposed on veteran singer Kishore Kumar by All India Radio and Doordarshan and the ostracism of actors such as Pran and Dev Anand, both outspoken critics of the government. Film journalism faced stiff censorship, disallowing even a gossip item about a young Amitabh and the sensational Zeenat Aman.

After Sanjay's death, the entry of Rajiv saw Amitabh offering his voice for the opening ceremony of the 1982 Asian Games in Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium. Rajiv, the chief organizer, sat in the front row as Amitabh anchored the show. Following the Bofors uproar, Amitabh, an MP from Allahabad, left politics, disillusioned. The actor was accused of being a middleman. Amitabh fought for his honour and won a protracted legal battle, but he could not sever his links with politics.

In August 1996, Amitabh's Juhu residence saw the then Prime Minister, H.D. Deve Gowda, breaking bread with the Shiv Sena chief, Balasaheb Thackeray. The sight of an iconic Amitabh bowing before the self-proclaimed moral guardian of Maharashtra did not go down well with many of his admirers.

A series of financial setbacks brought Amitabh close to politician Amar Singh and, through him, to the cash-rich Sahara group and its leader, Subroto Roy. When Amar Singh fell out with the Samajwadi Party chief, Mulayam Singh Yadav, Amitabh was seen in the company of Narendra Modi, whom he described as a '*shahenshah*' (emperor).

Activist and dancer Mallika Sarabhai, who had unsuccessfully contested the 1999 general election against L.K. Advani of the BJP, alleged that Amitabh's association with the Gujarat chief minister had three specific reasons. 'I was told by a Gujarat government official that Mr Bachchan wanted tax exemption in Gujarat, free land for his film city and a Rajya Sabha seat for his wife, Jaya Bachchan, who may not be able to represent Uttar Pradesh with the change in the political equations there,' she said. (*The Hindu,* 9 February 2010.)

Amitabh did not comment on Sarabhai's allegations, but he once told a journalist why he chose to quit politics. He recalled that once in Assam, a fan came running to him, saying how much he loved the actor, but hated his association with the Congress. 'Please do not make me choose between the two personalities,' the fan is said to have pleaded with him.

Congressmen who know Sonia's mind well wonder how Amitabh, who has championed the cause of the downtrodden in so many films, felt about the millions of his fans who are uncomfortable with Modi.

During his lifetime, when Rajiv's friendship with Amitabh ended abruptly, the young prime minister was cornered from all sides. In many ways, Amitabh's resignation from the Lok Sabha facilitated the Allahabad by-election. It led to the rise of Rajiv's chief detractor, Vishwanath Pratap Singh, and unity among the Opposition ranks. The defeat of the Congress in Allahabad marked the beginning of the end for both Rajiv and Congress hegemony in Indian politics. Ironically, this end was triggered from Allahabad by the actions of Rajiv's best friend, who had promised to stand by his side when Indira was assassinated.

24 Akbar Road was witness to plenty of mutual distrust and intrigue at the time. A section of leaders such as P.V. Narasimha Rao functioned in isolation, while Ghulam Nabi Azad called the shots in the AICC secretariat. Instead of formulating policies and plans, the party managers were kept busy firefighting. Many state governments were destabilized. The Congress messed up completely in Tamil Nadu, where it bravely chose to go alone in the assembly polls and received a severe drubbing for its overconfidence. Surprisingly, Rajiv did little to check his Tamil Nadu point man, G.K. Moopanar.

As AICC general secretary in charge of Uttar Pradesh, Azad provided legitimacy to Mulayam Singh Yadav, extending support to his casteist regime. Mulayam, a shrewd player of realpolitik, used his proximity to the Congress as a ploy to break the Congress's traditional votebank. The Congress did not recover for decades in Uttar Pradesh; it was Rahul Gandhi who, finally, in 2008–10, brought about some cause for hope for the Congress in the state.

As Rajiv got enmeshed deeper and deeper in Bofors, Ayodhya and the Shah Bano case, his visits to 24 Akbar Road reduced noticeably. The AICC general secretaries began assembling at his residence, where late-night deliberations replaced the CWC meetings. The ticket distribution process became individualistic, with each regional satrap trying to extract his pound of flesh. The preparing of position papers on key sociological, economic and political issues ceased and the 'young man in hurry' jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

Rajiv tried to spend time with his friends and family, but by 1988, all his activities were coming under severe scrutiny. His actions were either misinterpreted or exaggerated. For instance, when he went for a holiday to the Andamans with Sonia's family, a section of the media dubbed it as 'a national security risk' because of the presence of foreigners in the group.

The prime minister's party consisted of Rajiv, Sonia, their two children, Rahul and Priyanka, Ajitabh Bachchan's three daughters, Namrita, Naina and Nilima, Amitabh Bachchan, his wife, Jaya, their children, Shweta and Abhishek, Arun Singh's cousin, Brijendra Singh, his wife and their daughter, Ambika, Sonia Gandhi's mother, Paola Maino, sister, Nadia Valdimero, brother-in-law, Walter Vinci, who is married to her other sister, Anushka, a German friend of Sonia's called Sabina, and another friend of the children, Suresh. The other foreigners in the holiday party were Tom Anderson, a publisher friend of Rajiv's from Cambridge, and Paul and Karen Avis, children of another Cambridge friend, both of whom had been staying with the Gandhis in Delhi.

Rajiv's fatal tryst with destiny began when he chose to intervene in the protracted Sri Lankan Tamil problem in the neighbourhood. Rajiv was under pressure from the then Tamil Nadu chief minister, M.G. Ramachandran, to stop the Sri Lankan Sinhalese's excesses. The Junius R. Jayewardene government had begun to crack down on the Tamil guerrillas fighting for a separate Tamil homeland. There was a real danger of Tamil refugees flooding Tamil Nadu, creating a situation akin to that of refugees from East Pakistan in 1971.

Rajiv reckoned that a merger of the Tamil dominated islands in the North and East of Sri Lanka, control of the land and creation of a provisional government and pre-operational representation of Tamils in government jobs would bring lasting peace to the island. Rajiv signed an agreement with Jayewardene in July 1987, but instead of resolving the dispute, the presence of the hundred-thousand strong Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) on the island led to a war-like situation.

The IPKF began to fight along with the Sri Lankan army against the Tamil guerrillas, which it was supposed to have protected. Rajiv blamed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a fiercely motivated and deadly outfit, accusing its chief, V. Prabhakaran, of going back on every promise that he had made in New Delhi prior to the signing of the Gandhi– Jayewardene accord. But insiders claimed that Prabhakaran, during his stay at New Delhi's Ashoka Hotel, was forced into agreeing to conditions that he did not want. As Rajiv went out of power in 1989 and recuperated to bounce back in the 1991 general elections, the LTTE made a plan to liquidate the young Congress leader.

Sonia and Rajiv arrived early at Nirman Bhavan to cast their votes on 20 May 1991. It was 7:30 in the morning and still pleasant before the

heat of the day started in real earnest. Behind them, the line of voters was growing. Just behind them stood Rajesh Khanna, once a Bollywood megastar and now the Congress nominee for the prestigious New Delhi constituency. They were the first to vote and the polling booth was bustling with enthusiastic volunteers from the Youth Congress and the Seva Dal, the Congress's training wing.

Rajiv was dressed in a white cotton kurta pyjama, with a tricolour angavastram draped loosely around his neck. Priyanka was with her parents. Press photographers and camerapersons were particularly delighted to see Priyanka cast her vote. The Rajiv Gandhi government, which was in power during 1984–89, had lowered the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen, and Priyanka had just celebrated her nineteenth birthday.

A party-worker brought a carefully prepared puja tray to start the proceedings on an auspicious note. In his nervousness, he dropped the tray as he approached Rajiv. Sonia, standing behind Rajiv, froze. It was a breezy morning, but suddenly, she began to perspire. She asked her daughter to get her a glass of water, but, in the excitement of casting her first vote, Priyanka forgot. Rajiv was quick to observe Sonia's discomfiture. He gently held her hand, trying to reassure her, but she remained tense. Moments later, when she entered the polling booth, she could hardly find the Congress's hand among the plethora of symbols in the outsized ballot paper. Confounded by the long list of candidates, she would say later, 'I thought for a moment I would have to walk away without casting my vote for him.'

The snap polls in 1991 had been announced after the dramatic ouster of the Chandra Shekhar government, a weak and shaky coalition that had survived on Congress support for the few months that it was in power. 24 Akbar Road was a mute witness to the intrigue and drama that led to Rajiv dumping Chandra Shekhar, a former Congressman and a bitter critic of the 'dynasty', who, ironically, was propped up by the Congress party's one hundred and ninety-seven MPs to fulfil his ambition of becoming prime minister on the flimsy grounds that his government was spying on him.

Rajiv was informed by the estranged brother of Om Prakash Chautala, chief minister of Haryana, that Sampat Singh, home minister of Haryana, had put Rajiv under police surveillance. Two Haryana police constables were even seen sipping tea outside 24 Akbar Road. The presence of cops so near to the party office and to Rajiv's residence was enough for the Congress to withdraw support to Chandra Shekhar. Rajiv refused to meet Chandra Shekhar's representatives or even take telephone calls from the prime minister. So, the beleaguered Chandra Shekhar decided to call it a day.

The real reason for the withdrawal of Congress support was

Rajiv's political assessment that he was poised to return as India's next prime minister.

Soon after casting his vote at Nirman Bhavan, Rajiv left to resume the backbreaking election campaign that had seen him travel several thousand miles in the past few weeks. He was putting all he had into the campaign to try and make up for the defeat of 1989.

The campaigning had left him sleep-deprived and exhausted. His hands were so swollen that he could not wear his wedding band. Sonia kept pleading with him to take a break, but he was unrelenting. 'A little more push and we will emerge winners,' he told her with his disarming smile.

Earlier that year, they had been to Tehran, one of the capitals Rajiv visited on his peace initiative during the Gulf War. He gently reminded her of the good time they had had there. The reference was to a quiet dinner on their wedding anniversary – their twenty-third – on 25 February 1991. They were also looking forward to 23 May, when Rahul would return from the US, where he had been doing a course in bank securities in Boston. 'We will go out and have a meal together once the elections are over,' he told Sonia.

Twenty months on, the Opposition benches had made Rajiv much wiser. He deeply regretted the way he had frittered away the massive mandate of 1984. The Congress's strength in Parliament plummeted from 404 in 1984 to 197 in 1989. However, by 1991, the party's chances were bright as the public mood was turning against shaky coalitions and their power games. In his zeal to win at all costs, Rajiv was defying an Intelligence Bureau advisory to not hold public meetings in Tamil Nadu after sunset, for the Sri Lankan Tamil separatists had huge pockets of support in that state. Rajiv was on top of the LTTE's hit list. Rajiv largely ignored such advisories, which, he felt, came in the way of his interacting with the crowds at his rallies.

Rajiv was so confident of returning as the prime minister that he gave extensive interviews about the qualities of a good prime minister.

'The prime minister should have vision, a national vision,' he said to *India Today*, (quoted in Chatterjee, Rupa, *Sonia Gandhi: The Lady in Shadow*, Butala Publications, New Delhi, 1998) adding that he would be able to push through a progressive, reformist agenda despite the odds, once he occupied the prime minister's chair. Rajiv told Neena Gopal of Gulf News that the biggest challenge before him was to curb the divisiveness that had crept in under the stewardship of V.P. Singh, Chandra Shekhar's predecessor, whose measures to help the backward had instead deepened caste differences and led to his downfall.

The next day, on 21 May, Rajiv boarded a helicopter for a whirlwind tour of the coastal areas of Bhadrak, Angul, Gunupur and

Paralakhemundi in Orissa before crossing over to Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh. Uma Gajapathi Raju was the Congress nominee there. Rajiv was a great votary of getting young professionals into politics, and he had made a special effort to get her a ticket.

That evening, keen to catch up on his sleep, Rajiv toyed with the idea of not going to Sriperumbudur. He was extremely hungry and Raju had invited him to her house for dinner, but he resisted the offer. His party expected an extra bit from him. Sharing his thoughts with a party functionary, he said, 'I will catch up on my sleep at leisure with Rahul, Priyanka and Sonia around. Maragatham Chandrasekhar (the Congress candidate from Sriperumbudur) is an old friend of Mama (Indira Gandhi),' thereby overruling the suggestion that the former prime minister should not visit at night the constituency where the LTTE was known to have significant support. As Rajiv left for the airport, Raju sent him some pizza, *idlis* and *sambhar-rasam*.

Rajiv boarded the plane, but there was a change in plans after a technical snag was discovered. It was decided to have a night halt at Visakhapatnam after all. While he was driving down to the Circuit House where he was to stay, a constable came hurrying after him to inform him that the plane was now ready to take off. When the flight took off, a hungry Rajiv discovered that the food Raju had packed for him had been left behind in the car.

According to Suman Dubey, (*Hindustan Times*, 23 May 1991) Rajiv's then press advisor, who accompanied him on the campaign, the former prime minister woke up at 7.30 a.m. on 21 May. 'He was unusually late that day. But once he was up and about, he took off, addressing a series of meetings in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh before moving out to Tamil Nadu.'

When the *thalaivar* (leader) reached Sriperumbudur, there was little that could be described as security arrangements at the rally site. Constables of the Tamil Nadu police watched curiously as Rajiv mingled freely with the crowds. Rajiv's personal security attendant, Pradeep Gupta, made a feeble bid to keep the mob from touching him. The senior state Congress leaders, ranging from G.K. Moopanar to Maragatham Chandrasekar, were sitting on the dais about a hundred yards away. Rajiv began walking briskly towards them on the red carpet, accepting garlands from one and all.

Death stopped him while he listened to a poem being recited by the young Kokila, who was part of a suicide squad. His assassin, Dhanu, moved closer to him, carrying a garland made of sandalwood. An edgy Rajiv sensed something unusual, signalling to Constable Anusuya to regulate the crowd. But by then, Dhanu had bent, pretending to touch Rajiv's feet and triggering off the RDX strapped around her.

When the phone rang that fateful night Sonia and Priyanka were already in bed. The call was from a friend asking if all was well. Sensing that something was amiss, Sonia immediately dialled Rajiv's private secretary, V. George. V. George had already spoken to Nalini Chidambaram, wife of P. Chidambaram, who had informed him of the blast. George could not bring himself to tell Sonia about this. At 10.50 p.m. the telephone rang again. It was from Chennai and the caller insisted on speaking to 'Madam'. George took the call and asked about Rajiv's well-being. The line went silent and V. George feared the worst. 'Why don't you tell me how he is?' he shouted desperately into the phone.

'Sir, he is no more,' the caller said and the line went dead. Immediately after, a series of calls from the Tamil Nadu party unit confirmed the news.

The private secretary ran inside the house shouting, 'Madam, Madam!' Sonia came out in her nightgown. 'Madam, there has been a bomb attack,' he said.

Sonia only asked, 'Is he alive?' and when George could not answer she knew the day that she had dreaded since her husband took office had arrived. Sonia's wails of anguish echoed through the building.

Back in October 1984, hours after Indira had been assassinated, Sonia had pleaded with Rajiv not to take up his mother's mantle: 'I begged him not to let them do this. I pleaded with him, with others around him, too. He would be killed as well. He held my hands, hugged me, tried to soothe my desperation. He had no choice, he said, he would be killed anyway.'

And now, seven years later, Rajiv Gandhi was dead.

chapter five

The Non-Contender

At 24 Akbar Road, everyone was stunned by Rajiv's death. While the AICC karamcharis broke down, a small group of secretaries and local leaders sat down to consider the question uppermost in everyone's mind. After all, the general elections were on and someone had to lead the Congress. Rajiv's death had changed everything. While Sonia, Priyanka and a handful of party leaders mourned a personal loss, the regional satraps and courtiers were most absorbed with the question of succession. Everyone in the fray sought to grab every possible advantage. While the kingmakers and courtiers honed their skills to place their favourites in the top job, the powerbrokers and moneybags brazenly pushed their favourites in the race.

No clear successor to the Congress party leadership was in evidence. Indira and Rajiv Gandhi had a family hold on the party and Indira had made sure that Rajiv learnt from her and kept the regional satraps in their place. Now Rajiv's sudden death brought their ambitions to the fore.

Sharad Pawar from Maharashtra knew how to make up with his enemies; a Brahmin leader from Uttar Pradesh, Narain Dutt Tewari was a crafty and seasoned politician; the Madhya Pradesh leader, Arjun Singh was known for his political manoeuvring and for giving Rajiv a hard time by constantly disobeying him as chief minister. When Rajiv had pressed him to give up office following his indictment in a court case, Arjun had defied him and forced Rajiv to a compromise deal. Others in the fray were the Karnataka chief minister, Veerendra Patil, and his Andhra counterpart, M. Chenna Reddy. To counter these restless, ambitious leaders, Rajiv had promoted to powerful positions a set of courtiers who lacked a mass base of their own. These included Sardar Buta Singh, Ghulam Nabi Azad and Jitendra Prasada.

As news of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination spread a crowd began to gather outside 10 Janpath. All of a sudden the assembled Congressmen turned violent and started chanting slogans against all the perceived enemies of the Congress party – from former Prime Minister V.P. Singh, to Chandra Shekhar who was the current prime

minister, to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Lal Krishna Advani, and the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Ram Vilas Paswan, a prominent Dalit leader and V.P. Singh's associate, who lived two houses away, had to flee his house when the irate mob attacked his 12 Janpath residence and even burned pieces of furniture in his house.

Sonia Gandhi remembered only too well what had happened after Indira's assassination. She called for R.K. Dhawan and Captain Satish Sharma, one of Rajiv's flying club buddies who was close to the family, and instructed them to ensure that nothing untoward happened.

Well past midnight, Arjun Singh was outside 10 Janpath, stoking the sentiments of a group of party-loyalists who chanted, 'Sonia *lao, desh bachao* (Bring in Sonia, save the country).' Those toying with the idea of collective leadership in the post-Rajiv Congress quickly spotted Arjun's agenda. 'Oh dear, it is going to be family again,' whispered a former Union minister from Maharashtra.

This was not the first time that the Congress had faced a leadership issue. In 1984, when Indira Gandhi was assassinated, Congressmen saw the young Rajiv as their heir apparent. Nevertheless, Rajiv's selection had not been as smooth as Indira would have liked because of Pranab Mukherjee's ambitions. He had tried to project himself as a likely successor; a mistake that proved so expensive that he had been forced to leave the Congress and float his own party. Many years later, when asked what his party had been called, Pranab admitted that even he had forgotten its name!

The CWC, consisting of twelve members and two permanent and four special invitees, convened at 24 Akbar Road eighteen hours after Rajiv's death. Sitting down on white sheets the party leaders left the place meant for the leader vacant as a mark of respect for their departed leader. The meeting lasted more than a hundred minutes, but no refreshments were served.

Hours before the meeting, the Congress coterie had held several meetings to decide who would chair the CWC meeting in the absence of the Congress president. According to the Congress constitution, the party's seniormost general secretary should head such meetings, but there was no agreement on the seniority of the general secretaries.

Finally, Pranab, who was not in the succession race, had proposed P.V. Narasimha Rao's name. Rao had sought retirement from active politics on the eve of the 1991 general election and had declined to contest the polls. He was non-controversial and readily accepted by all groups and factions as chairperson of the meet, even though he was not even a CWC member. Thus, Rao was chosen because of his

seniority, his long association with Indira and Rajiv, and his lack of status as a serious contender.

The others present at the CWC meeting were K. Karunakaran, Arjun Singh, Ghulam Nabi Azad, Balram Jakhar, Meira Kumar, Jagannath Pahadia, Rajendra Kumari Bajpai, H.K.L. Bhagat, Buta Singh, Ram Chandra Vikal and Sitaram Kesri. Permanent invitees included Sharad Pawar and Janardhan Reddy, and the special invitees were Jitendra Prasada, M.L. Fotedar and P. Shiv Shankar.

At the conclusion of the meeting Arjun proposed that Sonia Gandhi take over as the AICC chief and all the others present unanimously endorsed his proposal. Many years later, Pawar claimed he had raised a mild objection – a contention challenged by almost all those present at the meeting. When asked to spell out his objection, Pawar said he wanted to know if Sonia Gandhi had been consulted in this regard. He was, however, not incorrect in saying that Sonia's selection as AICC chief had not been unanimous. Significantly, many in the CWC, particularly those who knew her, were convinced that she would not accept the job. One account claimed that when Arjun was contemplating proposing Sonia's name, Pawar had been visibly agitated. At this point someone had scribbled a tiny note saying 'She will not accept', and had passed it to Pawar, who had sighed with relief. Yet another account has it that Arjun had only proposed Sonia's name to keep Pawar in check.

All the party leaders present at the meeting at 24 Akbar Road disregarded the fact that Sonia was not even a '*char anna*' member of the Congress party. *Char* – or four – *anna* membership was a prerequisite for anyone joining the party. Mahatma Gandhi, who is credited with giving the Congress a mass base during India's freedom struggle, had envisaged the concept of the *char anna* membership. No thought was given to Sonia's complete unfamiliarity with the method and machinations of India's political system.

Arjun's camp has yet another story: Arjun had approached Rao to propose Sonia's name, but the latter refused on the grounds that he was presiding over the emergency CWC meet. The insinuation made was that Rao was working on a different agenda while projecting himself as a non-partisan person.

Years later, when Arjun gained the upper hand in the Sonia-led Congress and Rao was unceremonially shown the door, his supporters added Rao's 'defiant act in 1991' to their political chargesheet against the former prime minister to convince Sonia to keep him out of all party forums.

These deliberations took place while Rajiv's body still lay in state. The CWC's decision was communicated to Sonia by a group of party leaders, which included Ghulam Nabi Azad and Pranab Mukherjee.

The meeting between the Congress leaders and Sonia lasted barely ten minutes. Sonia did not say anything about it, but she must have been taken aback by the timing of the request.

A day later, she issued a small statement, refusing to accept the post. The note read:

'The tragedy that has befallen me and my children does not make it possible for me to accept the presidentship of the Congress.'

Family friends said that Sonia and her children did not even consider the offer. 'In fact, it was considered extremely insensitive on the part of the CWC to have made such a gesture when Rajiv's funeral had not taken place,' one of them said, confirming that there was no discussion even among close friends about the CWC offer. 'We were all too shocked and grieved to discuss politics,' said a friend of Rajiv's, who later opposed Sonia's entry into politics.

Actor Amitabh Bachchan, who was still close to the family, was also opposed to Sonia entering politics. At that juncture, his opinion was greatly valued. Amitabh had been unhappy with most of Rajiv's party managers when he was an MP from Allahabad between 1985 and 1987. Amitabh is said to have recalled how Rajiv was forced to lead the party in a similar fashion after Indira's assassination and wondered how long the members of the Gandhi family would continue to make such sacrifices.

Meanwhile, Pranab broke the news of Sonia's selection to the media and faced a hostile press.

'She is the only person who will be able to provide leadership at this crucial juncture and, under her leadership, the future of the Congress is bright,' Pranab said, summing up the CWC's deliberations. The former finance minister had an answer for everything.

'How has the Congress accepted a leader who, until 1983, was not even an Indian citizen?' he was asked.

'She is an Indian housewife and has been exercising her franchise in the New Delhi constituency,' he said.

When he was asked if she would be projected as the next prime minister, Pranab said, 'We will cross that bridge when we reach it.'

Had Sonia been consulted? Would she accept the job? 'She will accept,' Pranab said stoutly, claiming that she had been consulted informally – a fact disputed by Sonia. Pranab said later that he had been misinformed!

The family faithful was just not prepared to accept Sonia's refusal. The outgoing Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP) quickly endorsed the CWC's decision. In other words, if Sonia had accepted the CWC offer, she would have been the party's candidate for prime minister after the elections in 1991.

Each day, groups of party-men led by senior leaders called on Sonia, while Seva Dal workers raised slogans such as 'Rajiv Gandhi *amar rahe*, Soniaji *lao*, *desh bachao* (May Rajiv live forever, bring Sonia, save the country).' A disgusted Sonia finally summoned Vincent George and asked him to send the party-men away.

Senior leader Vasant Sathe raised the issue of an acting interim president of the Congress. According to Sathe, the infighting and lobbying for the post of Congress chief was proving to be costly for the party, which was in the midst of elections. Sathe suggested that the AICC convene a session soon after the general elections to choose its new leader.

The party's chief ministers, too, began arriving at 24 Akbar Road and mounted pressure on the CWC to settle the leadership issue. They sought a leader with a good image and a national presence.

There were seven serious aspirants to succeed Rajiv as Congress chief. Each had his own agenda, but none was willing to repeat Pranab's folly of 1984 by announcing their candidature. For many years to come, these leaders played a pivotal role in the Congress. Some were sidelined and died disillusioned men. The stories of those times are fascinating accounts of power play and intrigue. The senior leaders waged a no-holds-barred war against one another and finally accepted a completely inexperienced and reluctant Sonia in 1998 in order to forestall the prospect of one of them taking over. The motto was simple: 'If it can't be me, it cannot be you either.'

P.V. Narasimha Rao was the one Congress president who sought to run the party without involving the Gandhi family. During his tenure as AICC chief during 1991–96, he failed to win assembly polls in major states such as Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Assam. According to Rao, the organizational set-up of the Congress placed the entire onus on the leadership. Rao learnt this the hard way when he faced a sustained battle for supremacy from the day he took over as Rajiv's successor.

The process of Rao's selection itself was a convoluted one. When the jockeying for Rajiv's successor began, Pawar and his camp followers were quick to take the lead. They were convinced that the time had come for a Maratha to take control of the Delhi durbar. Pawar's point man in Delhi was Suresh Kalmadi, a man who wore several hats – sports organizer, event manager, party animal, media baron and politician. A lavish dinner was organized at a five-star hotel where forty-eight Congressmen were offered the best of wine and food. The idea, of course, was to elicit support for Pawar as the leader of the Congress. The poor attendance at the dinner, however, marred Pawar's prospects and many of the MPs from Maharashtra, Orissa,

Punjab and Tamil Nadu became suspect in the eyes of the new leadership.

The prospect of Pawar becoming Congress chief and, subsequently, prime minister got his supporters so keyed up that one of his lieutenants declared that what Pawar's mentor, Y.B. Chavan, a towering leader of Indira's time, could not achieve, the man from Baramati would. Pawar had played a big role in the transformation of Baramati into a high-yield agricultural zone. Members of the Bombay Club, an informal group of powerful industrialists who were wary of the growing clout of multinationals, were also excited about Pawar's chances and sent word that he need not bother about resources to influence the Congress MPs.

Pawar was not comfortable in the durbar culture of the Congress. He had deserted the Congress twice and did not get along with Rajiv on account of mutual suspicion. He had no rapport with Sonia. When he tried to break the ice by narrating how he was the first to have discovered the 'Italian connection' when he signed a memorandum of understanding with an Italian wine company way back in the 1960s, Sonia was not impressed.

Ironically, it was Arjun Singh, the then AICC vice-president, who brought Pawar back to the Congress during the Rajiv era. In the post-Rajiv era, however, Pawar and Arjun came face to face in a battle for supremacy.

If Arjun was busy seeking divine intervention and Pawar was thinking of fulfilling Maratha leader Shivaji's dream of reaching the seat of power, the young and dashing maharaja of Gwalior, Madhavrao Scindia, was projecting himself as Rajiv's true successor. The Scindias are the richest royals in the country. Scindia also had the backing of seven or eight MPs from Madhya Pradesh, who were opposed to Arjun. In addition, he was counting on support from a powerful newspaper and other similarly influential lobbies.

As the Union railway minister, Scindia had become a hero of sorts for the growing middle class by introducing fast and comfortable trains such as the Shatabdi trains between Delhi and several state capitals and installing a computerized reservation system that reduced the serpentine queues at ticket counters.

In May 1991, the news of Scindia's candidature led to a chain reaction. Rajesh Pilot, a former squadron leader from the Indian Air Force, joined the fray, projecting himself as a young leader suited to step into Rajiv's shoes. Unlike Scindia, Singh and Pawar, Pilot had no locus standi in terms of experience, either in the organization or in the government. Pilot was, in fact, yet to become a cabinet minister. He was merely a minister of state in the Rajiv government. His

candidature was, therefore, more in the nature of positioning for the future.

Many Congress leaders believed that the days of the rajas and maharajas ended when India became a democratic republic. Thus, Pilot tried to project himself as a man of the masses. He harped on the theme of being a commoner: He was a Gujjar from Western Uttar Pradesh, who had made it to the power centres of Raisina Hill by supplying fresh milk there. Pilot, whose name was originally Rajeshwar Prasad, picked issues and campaigns that were aimed at weeding out corruption from high places. In the process, he earned the favour of the middle class, who liked his emphasis on probity in public life. Leaders of the old guard, such as Sitaram Kesri, weren't so impressed and loved to describe Pilot as 'autopilot', deriding his inexperience in the organization.

Among the contenders was also Narain Dutt Tiwari, whom many considered a 'politician among politicians'. Panditji – he was a Brahmin, hence so addressed – was less controversial in 1991 than in 2009, when, as governor of Andhra Pradesh, he was caught on video with his pants down in a sleazy sex scandal in Hyderabad's Raj Bhavan. On 25 December 2009, a Hyderabad-based TV channel, ABN Andhra Jyothi News, aired three-and-a-half minutes of video showing Tiwari in bed with three young women. It was unprecedented that a governor and former Union minister be shown kissing and performing sexual acts on camera. Tiwari was already facing a paternity suit from a young boy who claimed to be his son.

Had Tiwari not lost the Lok Sabha polls in May 1991, he would have been a serious candidate and might even have outdone Rao. Most significantly, he was from Uttar Pradesh, the heartland of Indian politics, which used to send 85 parliamentarians to the 545-member Parliament. He had vast experience as a four-time chief minister of the state and had handled the industry, finance and external affairs portfolios in the Union cabinet. Moreover, at that time at least, his bedroom exploits remained confined to gossip sessions among select party leaders.

But working against Tiwari were the differences that had cropped up with Rajiv during the course of the elections. Rajiv had asked Tiwari to not contest the Lok Sabha seat from Nainital because Tiwari was also a candidate for the assembly polls. But Panditji wanted to contest both seats because the prospects of forming a government in Uttar Pradesh, where the Congress fortunes had been on the decline, were rather bleak. Obviously, he did not want to cool his heels in the Lucknow Vidhan Sabha as the leader of the Opposition, while his rivals went on to become central ministers.

The coterie around Rajiv, however, had offered a different story. They said Tiwari was hoping to edge Rajiv out as the leader of the party in the eventuality of the Congress failing to get a majority in Parliament. They thought he was becoming too big for his boots, and Rajiv had bought that line of argument. He was not convinced by Tiwari's explanation that he could not reach the district collector in time to withdraw his nomination papers. The Tiwari camp kept its hopes alive till the results were declared and it was found that a former newspaper vendor, Balraj Passi, of the BJP, had become a giant-killer. It was Passi's moment of glory and the end of Tiwari's prime ministerial dreams.

Sonia finally relented towards Tiwari in 2002 when, as party chief, she appointed him chief minister of the then newly created state of Uttaranchal (now called Uttarakhand). But Tiwari was not her first choice. She wanted the party's MLAs to accept local leader Harish Rawat, but a rebellion from Satpalji Maharaj, a spiritual leader-cum-politician, forced her hand. Tiwari came and bowed before her. She smiled and said, 'Uttaranchal *jaakar vikas kariye* (Go to Uttaranchal and help develop the state).'

A section of Congressmen wanted the then vice-president, Dr Shankar Dayal Sharma, to step down and take charge of the party. Sharma, scholar of repute, freedom fighter and Nehru– Gandhi loyalist, who had also been a Congress president, wanted to become prime minister, too. The moment Sonia turned down the CWC's plea to succeed Rajiv, Sharma's followers swung into action. His son, Ashutosh, and wife, Vimla, took charge of neutralizing arch-rival Arjun Singh. The Arjun–Sharma rivalry had its origins in their home state, Madhya Pradesh, where Brahmins and Thakurs are constantly locked in a battle for supremacy in the political arena. Sharma almost made it despite Arjun's opposition; he lost the battle at the last moment when another elderly Brahmin edged him out.

When Sharma realized he was nowhere in the leadership race, he made an announcement denying that he was in the running for the post of AICC chief. He said that 'constitutional functionaries' should remain non-partisan, particularly when elections were underway.

The seventh, and least likely, contender was P.V. Narasimha Rao. He was so low-key that the others never really considered him in the fray at all. But it was on him that the mantle fell. Arjun saw in him a stopgap arrangement to check Pawar. In Arjun's scheme of things, Rao's appointment was a temporary measure to enable him to regroup his supporters before the final assault on the CPP.

There was talk of a deal being struck between Singh and Rao. As part of the quid pro quo, the latter was expected to appoint him AICC chief. Indira's trusted lieutenant, Makhan Lal Fotedar, a former Jammu and Kashmir official who was known for his backroom skills and politicking, worked out the pact. Ajit Jogi, who later rose to become chief minister of Chhattisgarh, claimed to be a witness when Fotedar mooted the idea of Arjun as the party chief in exchange for support to Rao as prime minister and Rao's endorsement of the move. According to Jogi, Rao simply went back on his word. The Rao camp denied there was any such deal, saying that it may have been merely one among the many suggestions given to him.

When the leadership tussle peaked four days after Rajiv's assassination, Arjun wrote a letter to Rao, who did not, incidentally, then hold any official post in the party, clarifying that he was not in the fray. Among other things, Arjun said the 'thought of becoming Congress president had never occurred to him.' However, many leaders close to him openly talked about Arjun being made president of the AICC. They even inspected the Congress president's room at 24 Akbar Road and suggested changes as per Vaastu Shastra.

Unfortunately for Arjun, his detractor, Pawar, was also working on an identical game-plan, viewing Rao as a temporary arrangement. As Maharashtra chief minister, Pawar issued a series of statements. While ruling himself out of the race for the Congress presidentship, he repeatedly insisted that the post of CPP chief should be kept open. He favoured the 'one-man one-post' norm and said the era of towering personalities was over, so the Congress should be run by a collective leadership.

Rao proved all of them wrong. He himself had never believed that he would get a chance to lead the Congress and the nation at the fag-end of his political career. He had been disappointed that Rajiv had allowed his opportunist friends to destroy the credibility of his government between 1984 and 1989. However, unlike V.P. Singh, Rao made no attempt to confront Rajiv, and when the party began searching for candidates for the 1991 general election, he quietly told Rajiv that he wanted to retire from politics and go back to Andhra Pradesh to write his memoirs. Rajiv was surprised, but did not insist that he stay on. He, however, sought an assurance that Rao would finalize the party manifesto before he left.

Rajiv's assassination altered everything. Kingmakers such as Fotedar and Kesri began looking for Narasimha Rao when Arjun and Pawar triggered their war to win over the party MPs. Fotedar thought the acrimony would destroy party unity. The prospect of Shankar Dayal Sharma taking over as AICC chief rattled Arjun so much that he retreated in favour of Rao. Pawar, who had remained adamant on a

contest, also fell in line when Rao said to him philosophically, 'I will not be able to carry the burden too long.'

At this point, a large number of party-men sought Sonia's intervention even though she was in mourning. In the guise of offering condolences, groups of Congress leaders and MPs began calling on her. Vincent George had assumed charge as Sonia's private secretary by this time and encouraged the party functionaries to call on her. Every day, some delegation or the other would meet Sonia, in addition to the numerous others who went purely to offer their condolences.

Although Sonia may have disliked politics intensely, she continued to meet party members who called on her. She seldom discussed politics, but listened in rapt attention, reading their faces, gauging their mood, searching, looking for something in them.

Though Sonia did not give any clear indication of her preference for Rajiv's successor, the Congressmen kept disclosing their choices to her. A majority of them opposed Pawar. She was told that his promotion as AICC chief would reflect poorly on the party, which had always stood for the downtrodden and the minority and backward communities, because Pawar was seen as representing the interests of rich farmers and industrialists. Moreover, the Maratha leader was not a traditional Congressman. 'Look at the way he ditched Vasantdada Patil,' a Maharashtra leader told Sonia. In his assessment, Narasimha Rao could be trusted. He said that Rajiv had asked Rao and Mohsina Kidwai, a former Union minister and close associate of Indira's, to lead Indira's funeral procession because the two had been extremely close to her. Rao 'will never let you down', the Maharashtra MP told Sonia.

Sonia made it clear that she was reluctant to take on any responsibility and asked some senior leaders why they could not decide amongst themselves who the leader should be. The leaders admitted that the party was not capable of undertaking such a task; with towering personalities such as Nehru, Indira and Rajiv to lead them, there had been no need to develop a mechanism for succession and they wanted someone to guide them. Sonia was perplexed about why they were so confident she would join politics. 'Haven't I told them I am not interested?' she asked herself.

At another level, Sonia sent enough signals to indicate that in a choice between Pawar and Narasimha Rao, she would prefer Rao. Rao's formal election as leader of the Congress was not very dramatic as the other six contenders had virtually given up. Once the Congress leaders were convinced that 'Madam' wanted Rao, nominations for Rao's 'election' were arranged.

The venue was 24 Akbar Road. Several rooms were converted into state-wise nomination centres. Groups led by regional satraps

submitted nomination forms in favour of Rao. Within hours, he was unanimously elected AICC chief.

This was not the end of the leadership tussle. The general elections concluded in June. The Congress did exceedingly well in Maharashtra winning 37 out of the 48 Lok Sabha seats. Pawar quickly sent a letter saying that the newly-elected Congress MPs should elect the new prime minister. His supporters cited the precedence of the 1965 election, when the then Congress president K. Kamaraj had worked out a 'consensus' in favour of Indira Gandhi after the demise of Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri while ruling himself out as the prime ministerial candidate.

There was an all-round panic. Three power centres emerged even as 24 Akbar Road wore a deserted look. Maharashtra Sadan became the Pawar group's hub. Kalmadi started ordering food from nearby Taj Mansingh. The proximity to the Pandara Road market meant a generous and steady supply of grilled chicken and paneer tikka even in the small hours of the night. Those preferring 'liquid embellishments' were thoroughly entertained. Intelligence Bureau officials, trying to update their political masters, wrote rather exaggerated notes while braving the heat and their hunger.

Rao's residence – 9 Motilal Nehru Marg – too witnessed around-the-clock activity. The visitors were however only served tea and coffee and for breakfast were fed a supply of idlies that came from the Hyderabad House canteen. Rao remained reticent, with his trademark pout firmly in place.

K. Karunakaran operated from Kerala House where M.L. Fotedar shuttled in and out, trying to persuade P.C. Chako, a Pawar confidant, to prevail upon the Maratha strongman. Suddenly Delhi saw a host of lesser-known businessmen from Hyderabad, Bangalore, Kochi and Madras arriving at Motilal Nehru Marg with huge suitcases.

Sitaram Kesri too joined the Rao camp. The AICC treasurer tried to convince Pawar to let the Congress Working Committee elect the new prime minister instead of newly elected MPs. But Pawar said that the CWC was packed with members who had lost the 1991 Lok Sabha polls and insisted upon a secret ballot. Kesri argued that a secret ballot would tarnish the image of the party and may lead to dissent within the Congress.

19 June 1991 was fixed as the date for the Congress Parliamentary Party meeting (CPP). Rao and his managers failed to reach an agreement with Pawar. The meeting was rescheduled for 20 June. Rao avoided making any comment while Ratnakar Pandey, a self-proclaimed Sonia loyalist, claimed that 90 per cent of the newly elected MPs were with Rao.

Suddenly, in a dramatic move, Madhavrao Scindia, Arjun Singh

and N.K.P. Salve called on Rao together. Given Scindia's proximity to 10 Janpath, Arjun's opposition to Pawar, and the volte-face tendencies of Salve, a key Pawar supporter, this indicated that the tide was turning against Pawar.

Minutes before the official CPP meet, Pawar wrote a letter to Rao that read:

'I welcome the Congress president's acceptance of my demand for ascertaining the views of CPP in deciding the leadership of the party. I appeal to all members of the CPP to support P.V. Narasimha Rao and thus arrive at a unanimous decision.'

It is believed that Fotedar had communicated to Pawar that Rao would be willing to offer the party president's post to the Maratha leader once 'normalcy' was restored in the party and the country. Interestingly, a similar 'offer' was made to Arjun. However, as these 'offers' were verbal and communicated indirectly, they never came up for discussion, leave alone implementation.

Meanwhile, as the months passed, speculation over Sonia's role refused to die down. The Congressmen did not give up hope. In an interview in July 1991, R.K. Dhawan said that Sonia should enter politics to keep the Gandhi family name alive. Dhawan, however, clarified that Sonia had no attachment to politics, adding hastily: 'I have never in my tenure with Rajivji seen her interfering in matters of party or the government.'

In August 1991, *India Today* magazine ran a special story on the enigma called Sonia. It praised Rajiv's widow for refusing to join politics. She would be thrown in among the hangers-on who had undermined her husband's career, it said. The article also praised her for seeing through the manipulative plans of those who were trying to persuade her to join politics.

Seven years later, the khadi-clad, paan-chewing hangers-on were proved right. All along, Sonia had believed that she was moving in that direction as part of her duty to her husband's memory and to the larger interests of the party. She was constantly told that by shunning politics, she was in fact failing a family that had made sacrifices for the Congress from the days of Nehru and had strengthened the communal forces represented by the right wing BJP.

That she had to lead the Congress was presented as an overwhelming necessity. For the more cynical, her decision to join politics showed that the temptation of proving herself in the political arena had turned out to be just too hard to resist.

For the most part of Rao's tenure as party chief during 1991–96, 24

Akbar Road witnessed a protracted tug-of-war. Rao's name was sullied when his government faltered on the Ayodhya dispute, proved its majority in the Lok Sabha through dubious means, and ended up as one of the most corrupt regimes since Independence. It was rather ironical that the man who had prepared so many 'vision documents' for the revival and strengthening of the Congress in the Indira and Rajiv eras could do little when destiny crowned him prime minister of the country and Congress president after he had already announced his retirement plans – citing health reasons. Remarkably though, within days of taking over as prime minister, Rao's health problems vanished and he was re-energized enough to find a new vigour in life and a taste for power.

Narasimha Rao was born on 28 June 1921 in Vangara village in Karimnagar district of Andhra Pradesh. His father, P. Ranga Rao, and mother, Rukminiamma, hailed from agrarian families. Rao had to discontinue his pre-university studies when he was debarred from college for participating in a protest against the Nizam government's ban on singing *Vande Mataram* in college. Some of his detractors within the Congress later attributed Rao's stand on Ayodhya as the consequence of his misgivings about Muslims, which they claimed started during his college days in Hyderabad.

Rao's political career spanned several decades. His survival, success and elevation as prime minister is a remarkable story of how an ordinary individual of humble social origins and unobtrusive behaviour could climb the political ladder principally on the basis of intellectual strength and modest style.

As a follower of the chief minister of the erstwhile Hyderabad state, Burgula Ramakrishna, Rao joined the Congress, became a member of the AICC in 1951 and won an assembly seat in 1957. He held various ministerial positions in Andhra Pradesh until he became its chief minister in 1971.

Indira's choice of Rao as chief minister surprised many. It was unusual for Indira to have picked a Brahmin in the caste-ridden Andhra Pradesh. But Congressmen who knew Indira well said her choice of Rao spoke volumes for her political acumen. Rao was a non-controversial figure, a serious-minded person of some stature who had seldom canvassed for a ministerial berth. But his different and rather philosophical attitude towards politics made him a rather unsuccessful chief minister. Just months after succeeding K. Brahmananda Reddy, Rao spent large spells of time in New Delhi even as a separatist Telangana movement gained strength in his state.

Lacking in manipulative skills, Rao failed to quell dissent from within the party. The joke in Hyderabad was that even his own chief

secretary could meet him more easily in New Delhi than in Hyderabad. As the rift in the state cabinet between the Telangana and Andhra leaders began to widen, Rao came across as shallow and insincere. In the event, the state suffered so much that Indira had to impose president's rule even though the Congress had absolute majority in the assembly.

Rao began to bank more and more on Indira, often putting his thoughts in writing and giving them to her. Indira had always liked the intellectual content in his writings. When every leader of consequence was speaking ill of Indira and Sanjay during the Emergency, Rao served as her AICC general secretary. Sanjay, however, did not like Rao's mellow approach and had him removed from the post.

When Indira returned to power in 1980, she overruled Sanjay to appoint Rao Union minister for external affairs. In fact, Rao was the Union home minister when the anti-Sikh carnage that followed Indira's assassination took place. He did nothing to halt the violence. But the two commissions set up to inquire into the incidents – the Ranganath Mishra Commission set up by the Rajiv Gandhi government and the Nanavati Commission set up by the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government – virtually absolved him as there was no written record of his (in)action. Privately, Rao blamed H.K.L. Bhagat and other cabinet ministers who had reportedly taken 'charge' of events.

Unlike Sanjay, Rajiv had a liking for Rao and put him in charge of the new education policy and a number of measures, but away from the public eye, Rao remained a critic of all that for which Rajiv stood. Following the 1989 general elections debacle, Rao wrote a lengthy article in *Mainstream* magazine under the pen name 'Congressman'. The article was reproduced in *Frontline* magazine in its January 1990 issue.

In the article, titled 'The Great Suicide', Rao indicated that he had a poor opinion of Rajiv Gandhi as a leader and as a man, and offered his pessimistic overview of the prevailing political situation. He wrote of the negative consequences of Rajiv Gandhi's massive electoral victory in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination, which he claimed coincided with the resurgence of right-wing Hindu forces. He felt that the victory introduced a peculiar political insecurity in Rajiv Gandhi's mind, leading to a brash, immature and self-destructive style of functioning. His critique ended by defining the four-headed Frankenstein that stared India in the face: the Hindu–Muslim cleavage, the confrontation between the backward and forward classes, the tension between the scheduled castes and tribes and the non-scheduled castes and tribes, and the chasm between the rich and the

poor.

For most political analysts and commentators, Rao's story was that of a short-term manipulator who posed as a statesman. As a prime minister, he was both a success and a complete failure. It was during his tenure that India succeeded in pulling off an economic turnaround of the kind that was unprecedented anywhere else in the world. All prime ministers made noises about pulling back the licence-permit-quota raj, only Rao had the guts to do it.

Rao initiated major economic reforms. Even as 24 Akbar Road remained critical of the new economic thinking, Rao dealt deftly with the macroeconomic crisis. An agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), under which the Rao government borrowed some two-and-a-half billion dollars in 1991–92, involved policy conditions calling for reforms. The results were startling: economic growth, which was less than 1.5 per cent in 1991, rose to 7.5 per cent in 1996 and then stabilized at 5.2 per cent by 1998.

In terms of structural reforms, the extent of industrial licensing was severely curtailed. For instance, licensing was abolished for all but eighteen industries. Barriers for entry of new firms in areas previously reserved for public enterprises were removed and an anti-trust system set up.

Rao and his finance minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, were careful not to go for a complete sell-out of government-owned enterprises. Instead, they permitted the sale of shares first to financial institutions and subsequently to private individuals. Further reforms followed when the number of industries reserved for the public sector was reduced from eighteen to eight. In foreign trade, export subsidies were abolished.

By March 1992, near full convertibility on current accounts was introduced. Tariffs were lowered in both 1992 and 1993, but they supplied a substantial portion of government revenue. By 1994, India had accepted the IMF's Article VII on current account convertibility. Investment rose from less than a hundred million dollars to three-and-a-half billion dollars during January–September 1997.

Rao's biggest contribution to the nation and the Congress was the discovery of Dr Manmohan Singh as the architect of economic reforms. When Rao chose Singh as his finance minister, he perhaps never realized that the economist-technocrat would one day lead the country.

While Rao's 1991–96 tenure gave the Indian middle class the mobile phone, Manmohan teamed up with Sonia during 2004–10 to

connect with the people who had been left out of the transformation he had started when he was finance minister. Rao picked Manmohan to spearhead an economic policy departure from the past. There were many in the Congress who said in private that had a member of the Gandhi family been at the helm in 1991, Manmohan might not have been put in charge of the finance ministry. That may or may not be true, but what is true that Manmohan played only an advisory role during the regimes of both Indira and Rajiv Gandhi. In fact, Rajiv had once described the Manmohan Singh-led Planning Commission as a 'bunch of jokers'. Sonia, however, made amends when, in 2004, she stunned the world by declining to become prime minister and, instead, named Manmohan for the job.

Rao had other achievements to his credit too. The vexing Punjab problem was resolved. The country's foreign policy saw a major shift as India began to carve out a new global role for itself in the post-Soviet Union world.

Despite all that, in retrospect, columnist Vir Sanghvi felt that Rao was temperamentally unsuitable to become both prime minister and Congress chief. He lacked charisma, mass appeal and a political base, said Sanghvi. (Sanghvi, Vir, 'History Will Be Kinder to Narasimha Rao,' Rediff, 4 January 1996.)

Rao tried to bring back the cabinet form of government in which senior ministers were given autonomy, the Constitution was respected and most decisions were arrived at on the basis of a consensus, which included the Opposition. This was a paradigm shift from the days of Indira and Rajiv when the office of the prime minister alone decided all key issues.

Rao began on a positive note in Tirupati, where a grand AICC plenary was held in April 1992. He tried to follow up on Rajiv's dream of holding intra-party polls and 24 Akbar Road worked overtime to usher in a new era. But even as the AICC general secretaries planned organizational elections in the national headquarters after a gap of twenty years, on 27 February 1992, Rao became party president and the elections to the CWC were held in the temple town of Tirupati.

Arjun Singh and Sharad Pawar had different plans. Minutes before the CWC polls, an informal list of their favourites was circulated among the seven hundred-odd AICC delegates. Nine of the ten members on the Arjun–Pawar panel were elected.

Rao did not like being upstaged. He came on stage soon after the results were declared and lamented that the party of Gandhi and Nehru had failed to elect even a single woman or minority member. Rao's political secretary, Jitendra Prasada, who was the sole 'non-panel' member to have been elected, rose to announce his resignation.

Arjun, Pawar and the others followed. Within minutes, Rao accepted their resignations, but as per the special powers he held under the party constitution, he nominated them to the CWC and produced a list of ten others, mostly his favourites, for the apex body. Rao thus succeeded in clipping the wings of both Arjun and Pawar.

The Tirupati session deliberations enhanced Rao's political stature. But scandal hit him soon, with a well-known stockbroker, Harshad Mehta, alleging that the prime minister had accepted a suitcase full of currency notes from him.

Harshad Mehta had shot to notoriety on 23 April 1992, when journalist Sucheta Dalal exposed his dubious ways of dipping illegally into the banking system to finance his buying. The bank securities scam of 1992 pertained to his usage of bank funds for pushing up his favourite stocks – artificially. ACC, for example, had hit the magic figure of ten thousand rupees. The stock market, in general, which never saw such huge volumes of transactions, was euphoric. Mehta was labelled the man with the Midas touch.

Mehta's flashy lifestyle – whether it was his luxury Toyota cars or his seafront penthouse in Mumbai's Worli – made him one of the most identifiable men in the early 1990s. The crucial mechanism through which the scam was effected was the ready forward (RF) deal. The ready forward is in essence a secured short-term (typically fifteen days) loan from one bank to another. Crudely put, the bank lends against government securities just as a pawnbroker lends against jewellery. The borrowing bank actually sells the securities to the lending bank and buys them back at the end of the period of the loan, typically at a slightly higher price. It was this ready forward deal that Harshad Mehta and his cronies used with great success to channel money from the banking system

In June 1993, Mehta dropped a bomb when he alleged that he had given Rao a crore of rupees, packed in a suitcase, on 4 November 1991, shortly after the prime minister had met a delegation from Pakistan. From lawyer Ram Jethmalani to comedian Jaspal Bhatti, everyone tried to prove whether a crore of rupees in denominations of hundreds and fifties would fit into a twenty-eight-inch suitcase!

Rao managed to survive the allegation primarily on two counts. First, the money was not a bribe; second, it had reportedly gone to the AICC treasurer Sitaram Kesri at 24 Akbar Road, who had used it for a by-election in Punjab.

Unlike during the Indira or Rajiv eras, there was not much support for Rao. Most of his cabinet colleagues and AICC functionaries kept mum even as the prime minister and his close advisors fought to counter the allegation. Rao, perhaps, realized that there was little

point in counting on his colleagues.

B.P. Maurya, who had remained in oblivion since the Indira days, staged a comeback when Rao appointed him AICC general secretary along with Janardhana Poojary. The Youth Congress chief of the time was Maninderjit Singh. The trio emerged as Rao's voice in the party.

For some strange reason, Rao's visits to 24 Akbar Road were severely curtailed throughout the period that he served as party chief. This was strange because, since 1975–76, when he had become an AICC functionary, Rao had been a regular visitor to 24 Akbar Road. He used to get along well with a number of the *karamcharis* and office staff, and nurtured a desire to revive the party. Some felt that it was due to security considerations that most CWC meetings were held at 7 Race Course Road – the prime minister's residence in New Delhi. However, Rao's detractors within the Congress felt it had something to do with Rao's lack of confidence in facing the ordinary party-workers at 24 Akbar Road.

Despite his poor attendance there, 24 Akbar Road benefited the most from Rao. In fact, most of the 'unauthorized' construction there took place under his direction. The row of rooms with false ceilings at the entrance that housed AICC general secretary Prithviraj Chavan, the Sanjay Gandhi Memorial Trust, the library and other offices came up in the guise of providing shelter to Rao's security. Rajiv's maternal aunt, Sheila Kaul, who was minister for urban development, was often seen supervising the Central Public Works Department officials regarding more construction in the backyard, where a row of ten rooms came up during Rao's regime.

Rao's worst political legacy was a festering wound called Ayodhya. He sat silently pouting while zealots brought down the Babri Masjid, a mosque in Ayodhya, on 6 December 1992. He earned barbs from all quarters, but chose to break his silence on the Babri Masjid demolition only a year before his death. True to his mild-mannered self, he feebly tried to defend himself and sought to hit back at his Congress colleagues, accusing them of playing a devious game during the Babri Masjid demolition.

In his book, *Ayodhya*, (Penguin/Viking) which was published in 2006, Rao wrote:

'Brave words are being said after the event and people look like sages who knew everything beforehand. I must say that this is a pose because, having been authors of the crisis and enacted the whole drama of destruction, they wanted to have some specific role assigned to themselves in history, something even wrongly to be proud of.'

Days before the mosque was pulled down by *kar sevaks*, Arjun Singh, Rao's cabinet colleague, met Uttar Pradesh's BJP chief minister, Kalyan Singh, in Lucknow and declared that all would be fine. Arjun later led a sustained campaign against Rao, accusing him of allowing the demolition to happen.

The thrust of the former prime minister's argument was that while the Kalyan Singh government and the BJP had been solely responsible for the 'wanton vandalism', his Congress colleagues, too, had been guided by 'political and vote-earning considerations'.

'They had already made up their mind that one person had to be made historically responsible for the tragedy. They got a stick to beat me with. I understood it.'

In the chapter titled 'The Building Blocks of Dispute', Rao claimed that these Congress leaders had made a crucial calculation well before the mosque fell on 6 December 1992:

'If there had been success (in preventing any incident – as had seemed likely initially when Rao held behind the scenes consultations with Vishwa Hindu Parishad [VHP] and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh [RSS] leaders), they would readily share the credit or appropriate it for themselves. So they were playing either for success or an alibi.'

Rao also made a dig at Rajiv Gandhi, debating whether the *shilanyas* Rajiv had allowed in Ayodhya in 1989 took place on 'disputed' or 'undisputed' land. Rao cited several government records and statements to indicate that it was the latter.

Insisting that what had happened in Ayodhya in December 1992 was beyond his control, Rao pointed out that 'technically and legally', the actual possession of the site was not with the Centre. He claimed that when the mosque was being pulled down, the magistrate on duty had refused to allow the central forces stationed in the town to advance to the site, saying that the state government had given him written orders not to act:

'Thus, the exact moment when the forces could have scattered the crowd, (they were) turned back deliberately by official order. Here were two governments, creatures of the same Constitution, coming into confrontation. So, the central forces had to act according to the Constitution; there was no way out,' Rao observed.

In the introduction to the book, the former prime minister clarified that he didn't write *Ayodhya* to justify or vindicate himself. He only wanted to reveal the 'truth' about the events and motives of the time and point out certain 'grey aspects' in the Constitution.

Rao, whose credibility took a nosedive after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, said the answer to the 'inevitable and irresistible' question of why the Centre had failed to slap Article 356 on the state

in order to save the mosque can be found in the Supreme Court's observations on the constitutional provision. That lengthy answer takes up a rather large portion of the book:

'Not one of my colleagues who suggested president's rule came up basing it either on objective conditions prevailing in UP, nor had they any idea of how president's rule could be imposed in these specific conditions obtaining in UP on 6 December 1992 as distinguishable from the introduction of president's rule elsewhere in normal times,' Rao writes.

The late prime minister accused the BJP of scuppering a possible solution to the temple dispute to keep the Ayodhya pot boiling. Till August 1992, Rao said his talks with 'apolitical' sadhus and sanyasis on how and where a Ram temple could be built in Ayodhya without breaking the law or upsetting communal harmony were proceeding quite well. Then, all of a sudden, the sadhus broke off the talks. Four months later, the mosque was demolished by hordes of *kar sevaks*.

'Why did they (the sadhus) go back on their promise (to explore all avenues towards a peaceful settlement of the dispute)?' Rao wonders before offering a possible explanation:

'It was clear that there was a change of mind on their (the sadhus') part or, what is more likely, on the part of the political forces that controlled them. These forces deliberately wanted to get out of (a) friendly situation which the sanyasis were getting into with me and which, if left to itself, would have made the mandir issue wholly apolitical.'

This subtle aspect of the Babri Masjid dispute is very important and brings home the undeniable fact that the political forces behind the issue could not care less for the temple – they only wanted to retain a long-term, vote-rich communal issue for as long as they could. Till August 1992, Rao had been in constant touch with the RSS leadership at Nagpur to try and resolve the Ayodhya dispute amicably. Congress leaders such as V.N. Gadgil and Vasant Sathe acted as his emissaries. Rao had also sought the help of many apolitical saints, such as Jain Muni Acharya Sushil and his spiritual guru based in Ramtek (Maharashtra) to prevail upon the RSS and the VHP to go slow on Ayodhya.

Several sadhus and sants such as Mahant Avaidyanath, Vamdeoji Maharaj, Ramchandradas Paramhans, Mahant Nrityagopal Das, Swami Paramanandji, Swami Chinmayananda and Pejawar Swamiji had held several meetings with Rao at 7 Race Course Road. After arguing that a political group's 'majority communal orientation' and its need to keep Ayodhya as a 'permanent, evergreen issue' led it to scuttle the talks, Rao made an interesting observation, pointing out that the demand was not for just one temple; more had been lined up so that the

agitation could be kept alive even if the issue of one or two specific temples was settled.

'The number was three (Ayodhya, Mathura, Kashi) and, for good measure, in the unlikely event of all the three temple issues being settled amicably (unfortunately for them), there was a never-ending store of more than three thousand controversial temples lined up all over the country!' Rao said.

To his dismay, when he explained these finer points to his cabinet colleagues, they did not help him. Instead, they made him a scapegoat. 'It was me that they demolished,' Rao rued in his book.

Noted officer of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), B. Raman, had a different take on Rao's handling of the Ayodhya crisis. In his book, *The Kaoboys of RAW: Down Memory Lane*, Raman, who worked closely with Rao's team in 1992, recalled that throughout the crisis the prime minister had remained in two minds. Sometimes, Rao felt he could trust BJP leader L.K. Advani's assurances that the Babri Masjid would not be harmed. Moments later, he would think he should not trust Advani.

Prior to 6 December 1992, Rao had asked Raman if RAW had a guesthouse where he could meet Advani in secret. The RAW officer located a guesthouse that had been used by Rajiv Gandhi to meet the Akali leadership before Operation Blue Star in 1984. Rao subsequently asked RAW for a secret recording device and learnt how to use it. The prime minister of India wanted to use the device to record his discussion with Advani. It was given to him. Raman remembers that after the Babri Masjid fell, the device was returned to RAW:

'He (Rao) did not say whether he had used it and, if so, what happened to the recording. Nor did the RAW ask him.'

After the demolition of the mosque, Rao lay low for a while and then turned fatalist. He believed that the demolition was in the karma (destiny) of the nation and that there was no need to feel disturbed about his government's perceived inaction. Rao actually spelt out his karma theory when he invited all senior government officials of the rank of additional secretary and above to discuss the state of the nation in the wake of the demolition. It was an unusual move and no other prime minister had taken such a step.

Rao's relations with Sonia remained shrouded in mystery. Both being reticent persons, they did little to set the record straight. For Sonia, Rao was always a bit of an unknown quantity – learned, wise and a respected leader. At the same time, she was never comfortable with him because she had been repeatedly told about Rao's reported

proximity to controversial godman Chandraswami, who was under the scrutiny of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) in connection with the Rajiv Gandhi assassination.

There was another little-known aspect involving Rao. On 11 March 1991, when Rajiv was leader of the Congress and busy plotting against the then prime minister, Chandra Shekhar, a leading newspaper from Delhi had run a big, front-page story claiming that Narasimha Rao could become a 'compromise' prime minister.

The 'news', claiming unnamed sources, had alleged that a section of the Congress was working out arrangements with Chandra Shekhar to propose a coalition government and Rao was named as a compromise candidate.

The 'news' was virtually a bolt from the blue. Rajiv Gandhi was hale and hearty and in command of the party. A special press conference was called, even though it was a Sunday, at 24 Akbar Road where Rao was present to deny the story. The Congress spokesman said the party was gearing up to face the electorate and that the leadership was writing to the central Election Commission to hold general elections between 15 and 25 May 1991. Rao said he was not in the race for power amd was content to remain a loyal party-worker.

However, as destiny took a turn, one hundred days later, on 21 June 1991, Rao took oath as prime minister in the Durbar Hall of the Rashtrapati Bhavan. Rao who had no hope of becoming prime minister, who had denied all rumours of becoming prime minister, had landed the most coveted job that any politician aspires for!

When Sonia took over as Congress chief in 1998, political exigencies, too, did not allow her to patronize Rao. Sources close to her said Sonia could not retain Rao in the CWC because she did not want constant bickering in the party's apex decision-making body. She, however, found a way to get tips from Rao. As leader of the Opposition (1999–2004), she used Pranab Mukherjee's services frequently to get Rao's inputs on many national and international issues.

Pranab cleared the air on several occasions on issues that were touted as Rao's acts of defiance. One notable incident was Rao's submission before the Constitution review panel set up by the Atal Bihari Vajpayee regime under Justice M.N. Venkatachaliah and consisting of known Sonia-baiters such as P.A. Sangma. Fearing 'foul play', the Congress had decided to boycott the panel's meetings. Sonia was, therefore, upset when she learnt that Rao was going to make a submission before the panel.

Pranab was sent to gauge Rao's mood. The Chanakya of Indian politics told him that he had done nothing wrong. He had gone to clear Indira Gandhi's name in the context of the accession of Sikkim.

Rao had apparently told the panel that it was grossly wrong to view Indira's move to induct Sikkim as an Indian state as one that had played havoc with constitutional provisions. Sonia quickly gave him a clean chit, saying she had always held him in high regard and that her mother-in-law, too, had had great regard for Rao.

Rao's detractors within the Congress – including Arjun, Madhavrao Scindia, K. Karunakaran, K. Natwar Singh and Sheila Dikshit – missed no opportunity to dub Rao Sonia's rival. The truth was a little different.

While Sonia disapproved of the events leading to the Babri Masjid demolition and the tardy progress in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination probe, she had a healthy regard for Rao. This was manifest in the manner in which she overruled a majority of the party leaders in according importance to Rao at the party's plenary at Bangalore in March 2001.

Rao, too, did not indulge in politics and politicking when Sonia took over. In November 2000, Jitendra Prasada challenged her in the Congress organizational polls. His camp spread stories that they had Rao's blessings. Rao was quick to clarify through close confidant Bhuvnesh Chaturvedi that he had little interest in the party polls.

When Rao took over as prime minister and leader of the Congress, he called on Sonia Gandhi frequently, but the gesture was misconstrued as a sign of weakness and his tendency to pay obeisance at 10 Janpath.

In June 1991, the first meeting of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation (RGF) that took place at 10 Janpath kicked up a row as the prime minister was accused of breaking protocol. A closer look reveals a story of Rao's sensitivity.

Apparently, he had decided to attend the meeting at Sonia's residence after she expressed her inability to visit 7 Race Course Road, which used to be Rajiv's office. Sensitive to her feelings, Rao called up Sonia and told her he would come over. However, in Congress circles, the gesture was misconstrued.

Throughout Rao's tenure as prime minister and Congress president, he got the feeling that he could not command the respect normally accorded to the prime minister or the Congress president because he did not have a 'Gandhi–Nehru' surname. Rao told close associates that his 'lowly status' was evident outside the Congress party office as well.

In September 1993, Rao visited China. The prime minister was particularly keen to call on Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, who had never held office as the head of state or head of government. Rao was keen to call on Deng the theorist and reformer who had successfully

led China to market economy status. However, the Chinese authorities expressed their inability to accommodate his wish. Rao used RAW's services, urging them to point out that during Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China, he had paid a courtesy call to Deng. RAW was told bluntly that the Chinese had treated Rajiv as 'special' because he was the son of Indira Gandhi. They were not prepared to extend the same gesture to Rao as Deng had not received the then Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, who had visited Beijing around the same time.

Incidentally, the Chinese continue to give preferential treatment to the Gandhis. In October 2007, when Rahul Gandhi accompanied Sonia to China, the otherwise aloof Chinese went an extra mile to welcome him. The Chinese establishment reportedly viewed Rahul as the 'princeling', who was tipped to take up a future leadership position in India. The spotlight on Rahul was so strong that some leading communist leaders succeeded in convincing Rahul and, in turn, Sonia, that instead of viewing India as an Asian counterweight to and competing with China, Indians should cooperate with the Chinese.

The Babri Masjid demolition led to a deep schism between Rao and Sonia. She issued a statement condemning the act, signing it as chairperson of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation (RGF), of which Rao was a trustee. Informed sources recalled that some RGF members had made feeble attempts to dissuade her on the grounds that the foundation was an apolitical body. But Sonia vetoed their protests, pointing out that the principle of secularism was too dear to Rajiv to be ignored.

When Rao was implicated in a court case, Sonia went to see the former prime minister at his Motilal Nehru Marg residence. Sonia searched for words to comfort the old man. She finally said that as Congress chief, she was keen to extend legal aid to him. She said the AICC's legal department would provide him free legal counsel. A grim-faced Rao smiled faintly. With folded hands, he told Sonia, 'Madam, I wish to get acquitted.' Sonia instantly burst into laughter, getting the full import of Rao's scant regard for the out-of-work and hopeless bunch of lawyers functioning from a crammed room at 24 Akbar Road.

By the time Rao's end came on 23 December 2004, his isolation was complete. His body was not even allowed to be brought inside 24 Akbar Road – as had been customary for all Congress party chiefs and senior party leaders, for this was where homage was paid to the departed leader before the funeral rites commenced. Surprisingly, Sonia and Manmohan's healthy regard for Rao did nothing to prevail

upon the party to let Rao's body be kept inside 24 Akbar Road for a few hours as a mark of respect.

There was more humiliation to follow. Despite a special Union cabinet meeting at 3 p.m. on the subject of his funeral, no arrangements were made at his 9 Motilal Nehru Marg home to receive the body and place it on a platform, neither were flowers ordered, nor were carpets laid out by the administration for the mourning crowds to sit on; there was not even a shamiana on the lawns. His friend, Kishore Chandra Dev, a Congress leader of considerable standing, finally made arrangements for a shamiana and flowers. Manmohan Singh looked visibly moved as he remained quietly by the side of the body, which had been brought in from the hospital a little before 5 p.m. Sonia also stayed there for a few minutes.

For the Congress, whose leaders had by then revived their loyalty to the Gandhi family, Rao perhaps belonged to a different era, an interregnum that was essential for the party and the Gandhi family to come to terms with each other. But the party and its leaders – including Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who was finance minister during Rao's prime ministership – remembered Narasimha Rao after his demise as the 'father of economic reforms' and as the harbinger of neo-liberal economic policies.

chapter six

The Joker in the Pack

Following Rao's unceremonious exit, 24 Akbar Road saw the rise of Sitaram Kesri. His trademark style included the dark glasses and Gandhi cap, without which he was never seen; he also had a characteristic abjectness to his face.

Kesri had been a regular fixture at the Congress party office since 1978. When he replaced Pranab Mukherjee as party treasurer in 1980, he took over a room next to that of the Congress president. From September 1996 to March 1998, Kesri's tenure made Rajiv look like a visionary, Rao a statesman, and Sonia a saviour.

Kesri bagged the coveted post not because he was the best or the brightest, but because he was perceived to be a weak, pliable party leader. When Rao resigned as Congress president and the CWC gathered on 23 September 1996 to elect a new party president, Kerala's 'Mr Clean', A.K. Antony, was a front-runner.

Sonia was not averse to Antony heading the party in its hour of crisis. But Antony probably knew what he was up against. As many as twelve of the eighteen CWC members were Rao's men. Moreover, Antony lacked the necessary killer instinct and manipulative skills. In Kerala, Antony was known to be a master of the art of the low profile. While he held key posts and positions in both the party and the government, Antony was not media savvy. He struggled to give quotable quotes or pose for photo sessions. As chief minister of Kerala, Antony lived in a two-bedroom house. He both practised and preached austerity. His wife, Elizabeth, a bank employee, saw nothing wrong in hopping on to a city service bus every morning and going to work. Neither his chief ministership nor his cabinet post brought the Antony family any luxuries or privileges.

'Chacha' Kesri, during his short term as Congress chief in 1996–98, thought he had finally a chance to gain the recognition and fame he had craved all along. The Congress was out of power and the 'old man was in a hurry'. The wily, old-style backroom politician was at home in domestic politics. But he wanted to show himself off as a man on par with global leaders, capable of dealing with international issues, though the truth is he was completely out of his depth.

There were other limitations too. Party leaders from South and Northeast India had a problem communicating with him. Kesri loved boasting about his modest background and his antipathy towards the upper castes. Traditionally, the Congress has always had a distinct upper-caste character in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar. Often flaunting his proximity to Laloo Prasad Yadav, Kanshi Ram, Mulayam Singh Yadav and Ram Vilas Paswan, Kesri would fancy a 'grand alliance' to end 'Brahmin hegemony'. Though these ideas were put into practice largely because of the contemptuous response from Kanshi Ram and others, his views upset a sizeable section of the upper-caste leaders, particularly those hailing from North India. Kesri's promise to 'Mandalize' the Congress made them sit up, for they saw themselves about to lose their positions within the organization, too.

Kesri had studied in the college of hard knocks and had no formal education. He would declare himself a commoner who had been elected to the post of president by the party rank and file. Kesri had won the Congress presidential polls against Sharad Pawar and Rajesh Pilot although many within the Congress had termed the party polls a farce. Except for Maharashtra and parts of Uttar Pradesh, all state Congress units had backed Kesri. He had posted a landslide victory in an election that was widely criticized for irregularities, getting 6,224 AICC delegates' votes against Pawar's 882 and Rajesh Pilot's 354. In established Congress tradition, Kesri's opponents sang a chorus of congratulations and promised to cooperate with him.

Kesri took the challenge of being elected AICC chief very seriously. His commoner reference was taken as an act of defiance against Sonia and the Nehru–Gandhi family. However, days after Kesri's election, another drama unfolded. Some party leaders began passing on rumours and gossip to Sonia's private assistant, Vincent George. In the absence of any confirmation or denial, George was constantly informed about what Kesri was saying about Sonia and her loyalists. For instance, a leader from Madhya Pradesh told George quoting Kesri, 'He says he will finish off the Nehru–Gandhi family,' and added another Kesri quote, 'The days of rajas and maharajas are over. Foreigners must go back. I have fought thousands of Angrez and what is a petty Italian!'

In August 1997, Kolkata hosted the eightieth AICC plenary. A confident Kesri ordered elections for ten seats of the Congress Working Committee. Kesri, nearing eighty years of age, declared, 'The country is under threat and my party is the only saviour' and declared that his one-point agenda was to capture power in Delhi. The delegates clapped at Kesri's words, but they knew that he was relying on 'backroom manipulation' rather than a mass agenda to come to power.

Kesri went on to say, ‘I promise to take the party to power. We will unfurl the tricolour at the Lal Qila in the not too distant future.’ He dropped several hints that that the Congress had enough reason to withdraw its support to the I.K. Gujral government. The United Front government consisted of five regional parties, and the Left Front was the dominant constituent.

Sonia too reached Calcutta to witness Kesri’s moment of glory. Over 25,000 Congress supporters forced a visibly reluctant Sonia to sit on the dais. Sonia went up to make a brief speech: ‘I did not realize that I will have to speak here,’ she told the packed Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Indoor Stadium. Next, she fished out a prepared text, replete with quotes from Rajiv Gandhi’s speech at the party’s centenary celebrations in Mumbai in 1985. She went on to talk about how the party needed to rebuild bridges with the teeming millions of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward castes.

She said, ‘What has become of our great organization? Instead of a party that fired the imagination of the masses throughout the length and breadth of India, we have shrunk, losing touch with the toiling millions. It is not a question of victories and defeats in elections. For a democratic party, victories and defeats are part of its continuing political existence. But what does matter is whether or not we work among the masses, whether or not we are in tune with their struggles, their hopes and aspirations. We are a party of social transformation, but in our preoccupation with governance, we are drifting away from the people. Thereby, we have weakened ourselves and fallen prey to the ills that the loss of invigorating mass contact brings…’

Glancing briefly at a stoic Kesri, Sonia continued: ‘As we have distanced ourselves from the masses, basic issues of national unity and integrity, social change and economic development recede into the background. Instead, phony issues, shrouded in medieval obscurantism, occupy the centre of the stage. Our ideology of nationalism, secularism, democracy and socialism is the only relevant ideology for our goal country. But we are forgetting that we must take it to the masses, interpret its content in changing circumstances, and defend it against the attacks of our opponents…’

Much to Kesri’s discomfort, Sonia’s appearance and her speech were lustily cheered. A section of Congress delegates shouted, ‘*Sonia lao, Desh Bachao*.’

Kesri grew restless sensing that party leaders were viewing her as their only hope for salvation instead of him. When he rose to speak, Kesri turned to Sonia and remarked: ‘I know what our opponents are going to say about your coming here. They do not realize your strength.’ Taking a deep breath, Kesri then added, ‘She (Sonia) has always been my inspiration. I am an elected president of the party

and, therefore, an institution. I request you to maintain a clear link with the party.'

On her part, Sonia backed Kesri, declining to attend rebel Mamata Banerjee's invitation to attend a 'parallel session' that was underway in Calcutta. In doing so, Sonia again sent out a signal that she would associate herself only with the official Congress. Earlier too, when the Tiwari Congress was formed, Sonia avoided coming out in their support.

The Congress meet also saw party delegates endorsing Kesri's letter to the prime minister in January 1997 that all confidential records should be handed over to the Jain Commission so that it could conclude the Rajiv case.

The CWC elections saw Sonia shedding her reluctance to play an active role in the party; three rebels – Arjun, Pawar and Ghulam Nabi Azad – won berths in the CWC. Kesri had even circulated an eight-member panel for the ten CWC seats, which excluded the three successful 'rebels'. The trio's victory clearly outweighed the success of Ahmed Patel, Madhavrao Scindia, Tariq Anwar, Pranab Mukherjee, R.K. Dhawan and V.B. Reddy, all on Kesri's panel.

Another blow to Kesri came from Jitendra Prasada, who polled the second highest number of votes in the CWC election. After giving his nod to Kesri's list of eight, Prasada instructed his men to not vote for Scindia and Tariq Anwar. Instead, he asked them to vote for Pawar. Having joined hands with Kesri during the party president's election earlier in June, Prasada got himself nominated the party's vice-president a month before the plenary. Prasada saw the Kolkata plenary as an ideal forum to legitimize his elevation from a Kesri nominee to a leader who commanded the support of a large number of AICC delegates.

In some ways, Prasada was responsible for checking Kesri's hold over the CWC, which helped Sonia in March 1998. While Kesri managed to nominate some like Dr Manmohan Singh for the first time in the CWC, the presence of 'elected rebels' who enjoyed an exalted status led to his downfall.

During the CWC polls, the Calcutta Raj Bhavan, where Sonia stayed for a day, became a hot destination for the Congress leaders, with Kesri, N.D. Tiwari, Jitendra Prasada, Arjun and a host of others making a beeline to meet her. In one brief visit, Arjun claimed he even got her support for the CWC election, a point he made public at the plenary.

Kesri accused Arjun of 'leaking' the political draft resolution,

which was reproduced in *The Telegraph* and which highlighted how Pranab, Prasada, J.B. Patnaik and others had deleted critical references to Narasimha Rao's handling of corruption and the Babri Masjid issue. Kesri was heard shouting at the top of his voice at the stadium, 'I will not spare him.' This was in Sonia's presence, making it clear to her that he was referring to Arjun, the author of the draft political resolution. Interestingly, Congress president Arjun Singh and Sonia remained unaware of how the sensitive political document had reached *The Telegraph*.

Once Arjun was elected to the CWC, Kesri tried to make amends and said, 'I'm happy with the election. We will all go with a clean slate from here. We will only look towards our goal.' But the 'old man in a hurry' did not spell out how the Congress would go about achieving its goal of capturing power in Delhi. 'Power does not come without people's support. Let us bridge the gap between the workers and the leaders. We have to go and be with them,' commented Prasada in *Outlook* magazine, endorsing Sonia's refrain about the growing detachment of the party from 'the toiling masses'.

Soon, a large number of senior Congressmen grew fed up with Kesri's constant antics, manipulations and unpredictable nature. K. Karunakaran, Arjun Singh, A.K. Antony, Jitendra Prasada, Vijay Bhaskar Reddy, V.N. Gadgil and Madhav Singh Solanki continued to exert pressure on Sonia to intervene. The sum and substance of Arjun's campaign was that unless Sonia took on a more active political role, the Rajiv assassination probe would not make any headway, and the real culprits and key conspirators might even get away.

The moral pressure of the Rajiv assassination probe was, in fact, a turning point. It was the one issue that could make Sonia and her family overcome their reluctance to take up an active role in politics. Arjun was the first to identify this chink in the Gandhis' armour months after Rao took over as prime minister in 1991. He began attending virtually all the sittings of the Verma and Jain Commission hearings, sending details of the proceedings to 10 Janpath. At first, he got no response. Rahul and Priyanka were also seen regularly at the Vigyan Bhavan annexe, where the hearings were taking place. But Arjun's sporadic bid to strike a rapport with them did not succeed, since the Gandhi children remained aloof from the Congress politicians.

In all these behind-the-scenes deliberations, Sonia, too, had slowly begun overcoming her aversion for politics. Her interactions with the then Madhya Pradesh chief minister Digvijaya Singh, Rajasthan chief

minister Ashok Gehlot, Ahmed Patel and Kerala Congress chief Vayalar Ravi became more frequent. These leaders, who had earlier enjoyed proximity with Rajiv, requested her to step in and save the party. By December 1997, a number of Congress leaders, among them Buta Singh, Mani Shankar Aiyar, Suresh Kalmadi, Aslam Sher Khan and Rangarajan Kumaramanglam, left the Congress to join the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and other breakaway groups. P. Chidambaram and G.K. Moopanar had already left the party to float a breakaway Tamil Maanila Congress in Tamil Nadu.

Meanwhile, blissfully unaware of the developments at 10 Janpath, 'Chacha' Kesri was busy trying to build his own band of loyalists. Kesri knew that the party's MPs were getting restless. So, he began toying with the idea of pulling down H.D. Deve Gowda's United Front government. On a quiet Sunday morning on 30 March 1997, Kesri sought an appointment with the then president of India, S.D. Sharma, and informed him that, on behalf of the Congress, he was withdrawing support to the Deve Gowda government. For some reason, Kesri kept the Congress in the dark and tried to topple the United Front government without the help of ideology or taking into account the larger picture.

He was least concerned that a crucial budget session of Parliament was in session and that significant high-level Indo– Pak talks were on the anvil. What mattered to him were the calculations by which he lived. As a backroom boy of several decades, whose survival depended on his understanding of party power, Kesri felt that by removing Gowda, he would become the prime minister. His calculation was that the United Front MPs, who were against elections on the one hand, and rooting for a BJP government on the other, would have no choice but to support him. But the United Front held on, refusing to grant him his wish. When the deadlock continued for a few days, Kesri was forced to settle for a change of prime minister. Luck smiled on I.K. Gujral, who had been in a political wilderness of sorts ever since Indira had shunted him out as ambassador to Moscow many years ago. Kesri privately accepted defeat, but he pretended as though the change of prime minister was his victory. He hugged an uneasy Gujral, as if to show that everything was happening exactly as he had planned.

Kesri was confident that, despite his goof-up, Sonia would not upstage him. After all, as welfare minister between 1991 and 1996, Kesri had given standing orders to his ministry officials to clear all projects of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation on a priority basis. Since Sonia was head of the RGF, Kesri reckoned his gesture would keep him in her good books. Kesri's logic was simple. A large amount of money allocated to his ministry, earmarked for non-governmental

organizations (NGOs), was unused or was disappearing into the hands of unscrupulous elements. Kesri thought he was killing two birds with one stone.

'*Sarkari paisa hai. Agar Indira ke parivar ke paas ja raha hai to kya bura hai* (It is government money. If it is going to Indira's family, what is the harm)?' Kesri told some journalists.

Kesri's late-night durbars, held in his bedroom, were well attended. He was a widower and even middle-rung party leaders had free access to his Purana Qila Road house. Adjacent to the bedroom was a smaller anteroom, which was used for serious political deliberations. The bedroom reeked of alcohol and smoke, and the conversation revolved around politics, gossip and sex. Kesri's court had an amazing mix of people: freeloaders, intellectuals and moneybags attended, while Chacha sat on his bed with a glass of milk and medicines lined up on the side table. 'Take some cold milk? It is good for the stomach,' Kesri would tell anyone willing to listen. He would then scratch himself vigorously, toss some cherries to his dog, Ruchi, and then pass them on to the gathering.

The veteran leader was himself a great storyteller and gossip, with a view on virtually everything. '*Ek baat bata dete hain* (Let me tell you something),' he would start. The tale he loved to tell most was about how Rajendra Babu (the first president of India, Dr Rajendra Prasad) had had a great liking for him. Prasad had visited Danapur and spotted the young freedom fighter. 'I went to jail several times,' Kesri would recount, baring his back to show where he had been lashed by the '*lal pagris*', as the lathi-wielding British Raj police in Bihar were called.

Kesri's detractors told a different story, claiming that young Kesri had been booked under hoarding charges during World War II. Kesri's take on this was that the British used to deliberately come up with charges like that to malign freedom fighters.

Sometimes, Kesri would speak of how Subhas Chandra Bose was greater than Jawaharlal Nehru. 'I was part of the Forward Bloc and Netaji's team in Kolkata,' he would say, closing his eyes. He would ruminate on how India would have been different if Gandhiji had not made the mistake of picking Nehru over Bose. The non-violent pacifist would give way to the radical Kesri:

'We have a slave mentality. We have not got freedom after shedding blood. The non-violent method made us impotent. Had Subhas been around, the country would have been different,' Kesri would say, propagating the theory that the Nehru-led, Delhi-centric Congress had consciously suppressed leadership from Bengal. 'From Bose to Mamata Banerjee, it is the same story of suppression and injustice,' Kesri would tell a flabbergasted audience, which was left

wondering how Banerjee could be compared to Bose.

In the same breath, he would recall his proximity to some Bollywood actresses and how he used to borrow money from the former AICC chief D.K. Barooah to visit Mumbai!

His courtiers would delightedly chip in: 'One day, an actress came to see Kesriji when I was present. She said, "*Main aapke paas chhoti si aas lekar aayi hoon* (I have come to you with a small hope)." I felt like telling her, "Please don't lie. You do not have a *chhoti* ass!"' This bawdy joke drew hysterical laughter from all quarters – including Kesri.

As Congress president, Kesri was a regular visitor to 24 Akbar Road. Unlike Narasimha Rao, Indira or Rajiv, and later Congress president Sonia, Kesri loved holding court in the party office.

For Kesri, 28 December 1997 was just another day. A Kesri aide told scribes covering the Congress beat that the party president wanted to have an informal chat; it seems he had no idea that Sonia had chosen that day to go public about her intentions to join politics.

AICC spokesman V.N. Gadgil made the announcement even as Kesri sat in an adjoining room. In fact, a few minutes before Gadgil started talking to the media, Tom Vaddakan, AICC's media department secretary, sought to meet Kesri but the guard manning Kesri's door did not let him in. Tom lost his cool saying he had an important and urgent matter to deliver. He later claimed that he was excited because, having run through a small passage between 10 Janpath and 24 Akbar Road, he was out of breath. The reason for his excitement was that he was carrying an all-important note announcing that Sonia had agreed to campaign for the Congress in the general elections that were being called.

Senior journalist Harish Khare, who was with *The Hindu* then, had an appointment with Kesri. When Tom saw Khare, he requested the veteran journalist to let him pass on 10 Janpath's message to Kesri.

According to Tom, Kesri's reaction was far from being excited. Despite having made frequent public statements requesting Sonia to help the party, Kesri avoided facing the media to make the significant announcement. His reluctance to be the one to make the announcement of Sonia helping out the Congress showed that he did not in fact like the idea of Sonia's intervention. After his exit from the party, Kesri admitted that one 'part of him' (his heart) was keen to welcome Sonia, but another part (his head) held him back.

Incidentally, 28 December 1997 was the hundred and twelfth anniversary of the Indian National Congress. Sonia had, therefore, chosen a date that was historically significant. The general elections had already been announced but the Congress was far from ready.

With Sonia agreeing to take part in the election campaign, the focus shifted from Kesri to those perceived close to Sonia.

AICC general secretary Oscar Fernandes emerged as a powerful figure. In 24 Akbar Road, it was then said: 'If you cannot ask her (Sonia) go to Oscar.'

Oscar decided that the Congress state election committees, the central election committee and other important bodies that alloted tickets to aspirants would meet on 3 and 4 January 1998.

At a notional level, Kesri had the final say but for all practical purposes, Sonia's arrival changed everything. Kesri was further reduced by the day and watched mutely as Oscar walked in carrying files from 10 Janpath to 24 Akbar Road that were sent by Vincent George, and to which he, Kesri, duly affixed his signature on the dotted line. Kesri suspected that Arjun Singh was acting in concert with George. His suspicions proved right because when he met Sonia and tried to broach the subject, she told him: 'Kesriji, please consult Arjun Singhji and Madhavrao!'

The New Year edition of *The Hindu* in 1998 had a lead page column entitled the 'Year of Kesri' but already Sonia's managers were busy finalizing the venues for her debut and consulting astrologers. Sonia's first destination was Sriperumbudur. On 11 January 1998 she formally stepped into politics from the site of her husband's assassination. In her first-ever campaign speech made at the place where Rajiv was assassinated in May 1991, she made a strong attack on political parties who used religion for political gain.

The curious multitude turned out in droves to see her. All eyes, however, were drawn irresistibly to the vibrant red-and-saffron-clad figure beside her, Priyanka Gandhi, who spoke just one sentence in Tamil, exhorting the crowd to vote for the Congress. Over frenzied applause, they shouted back, 'Our future leader!'

There were many more requests for Sonia and Priyanka from all over. Prospective candidates pleaded with them to visit their constituency too. Sonia was seen as the saviour of the Congress. Oscar Fernandes and Vincent George had their hands full. Many old supporters who had been part of Team Rajiv joined forces with them. Former air force officers, pilots and navigation engineers all turned up. Inputs for Sonia's speeches started pouring in from all over. Each place on Sonia's itinerary was combed for its historical importance, for its part in the freedom struggle, and its links to Indira and Rajiv. In addition to all this, statistical data of caste, sub-caste, religion, voting pattern, etc., was also submitted to Sonia. 'Indira II' was in the making. And her first task was to regain the confidence of the traditional vote bank – the poor, the tribals and weaker sections, the

Muslims and other minorities.

7 Purana Qila Road wore a deserted look as the election campaign picked up. Kesri turned bitter, pointing an accusing finger at the Congress leaders and chief ministers of party-ruled states for making a beeline to 10 Janpath. His team of cronies and usual hangers-on stoked Kesri's insecurity by giving him more and more bad news. They said Sonia had been telling her audience that all was not well with the Congress. Kesri was told that Sonia was planning to take over the Congress in the guise of helping out the party. Kesri understood and predicted that she would play an active role in politics even after the elections.

Through the campaign period, Kesri rarely stepped out to seek votes for the party that he was still officially heading. This was unusual and unprecedented in the history of the Congress. For the first time the party president was sipping tea at home while the rest of the party was slugging it out in the open. Congressmen too proved quick to turn their backs on Kesri. There was no demand for Kesri the camapaigner even in his home state of Bihar. Kesri once decided to visit Jalandhar. Accompanying him was AICC general secretary Ghulam Nabi Azad. But the non-pressurized smaller aircraft had to turn around while flying over Ambala because Kesri developed breathing problems in the unpressurized cabin. Azad later recalled how he had remained extremely worried till the aircraft landed at Delhi airport. 'I was seriously worried about Chacha's health. He appeared (to be) in acute pain – almost choking,' recalled Azad. (Kidwai, Rasheed, *Sonia – A Biography*, Penguin, 2009.)

The outcome of the elections to the twelfth Lok Sabha, however, brought some cheer to Kesri. Instead of mourning the party's poor performance, Kesri turned cheerful and chatty. He wondered how the Congress under Sonia had managed to get less number of Lok Sabha seats than the meetings that she had addressed. During the backbreaking campaign, Sonia had visited a hundred and fifty-odd parliamentary constituencies while the party's tally in 1998 was only a hundred and forty-two! The Congress had lost the Nehru–Gandhi family's pocket borough of Amethi to the BJP. Senior leaders and trusted Sonia lieutenants Arjun Singh and N.D. Tiwari lost in Hoshangabad (Madhya Pradesh) and Nainital (then in Uttar Pradesh) respectively. The blame game began at once. While Kesri chuckled in delight, Sonia's managers astutely blamed Kesri for his stewardship of an organization in complete disarray.

The Sonia camp said that the Congress had failed to capitalize on

Sonia's charisma because of organizational weaknesses. Sonia accepted the argument and started toying with the idea of taking over the party. She, however, made it clear that unless Kesri stepped down gracefully and invited her to take over, she would not opt for a coup. But Chacha was in no mood to oblige.

The next chapter of the power struggle was put into motion. Worried CWC members held a series of secret conclaves to work out how to 'install' Sonia at the helm. Pranab Mukherjee, A.K. Antony and Jitendra Prasada were given the task of sounding Kesri out about retiring 'gracefully'. Initially, Kesri's 'nephews' Ahmed Patel and Ghulam Nabi Azad approached him. But Kesri laughed off the proposal. 'You have been sent by Arjun Singh and George. It cannot be Soniaji's words. If she wants me out, let her say so,' he told them.

A restless Pawar joined in the '*Kesri hatao*' campaign. It was not that Pawar was enthusiastic about Sonia taking over, but the Maratha strongman was getting feedback from Mumbai and the corporate world that as long as Kesri was the head of the party, the industrial houses would not support it. For the next few weeks, Antony, Pranab, Pawar and Prasada met on numerous occasions to take stock of the situation. In these deliberations, Pawar and Prasada favoured a 'surgical operation', but Pranab and Antony wanted more time. Arjun Singh and Vincent George began drumming up support for Sonia among newly elected MPs.

Soon a handful of Kesri supporters who held important party posts launched a counter-offensive. Led by party general secretary Tariq Anwar, this group sought to curtail CWC meetings that had to be convened by the party chief. Kesri was advised not to call any CWC meetings because the party's bigwigs might ask him to step down. Kesri was convinced that the party constitution gave him ultimate powers and that, as long as he was the elected chief, nobody would dare to remove him.

The pro-changers, however, succeeded in persuading Kesri to call a CWC meet on 5 March 1998 to assess the party's poor performance in the general elections. Kesri had little option but to concede. The meeting saw the CWC requesting Sonia to play a more direct and meaningful role. It took the unusual step of asking her to help pick a new leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP), a post that Kesri already held.

Kesri made his displeasure public. He accused Pawar of plotting against him in order to become CPP leader. Kesri told his supporter Tariq Anwar – who later joined Pawar's NCP – that Sonia would not let Pawar become CPP leader. The old man was proved right on this count at least. When Sonia took over as party chief, she got herself

elected CPP leader even though she was not an MP. She was helped by Pranab who suggested an amendment in the CPP constitution. It stated that any party leader was free to get elected to its parliamentary body even if he/she was not a member of either house of Parliament!

Amid many deliberations and behind-the-scenes activities, Kesri finally agreed to see Sonia. The loyalist in him could not resist unilaterally declaring that he was willing to step down as party chief if she was going to take over from him. Kesri later recalled to the author how he was taken aback when she gently asked him, 'When?'

Kesri's dreams of a 'commoner' becoming prime minister were over. His constant refrain that the Congress president could not be ousted was no longer convincing. Some of his close aides asked him to defy the leadership. But Kesri could not muster the courage. He would keep recalling to anyone who cared to listen how Indira Gandhi had made him AICC treasurer. The bravado at being 'elected' AICC chief evaporated. But there was more drama to ensue.

Kesri told Sonia and the other restless CWC members that he would convene a press conference to make the formal announcement of his departure.

On 9 March 1998, Kesri announced his resignation as Congress president, but before the 'good news' could travel from 24 Akbar Road to 10 Janpath, Kesri threw in a rider.

Under pressure from his coterie, Kesri claimed he had merely stated his intention to step down. The AICC chief said he had summoned the news agencies to clarify that he would place his resignation before the AICC general body meeting, which has more than a thousand delegates, to seek their approval. 'They have elected me, and I will seek their permission to resign,' he said.

The next six days were chaotic, full of suspense and an unseemly tug-of-war. Kesri kept giving interviews and sound bites that were contradictory. The old guard called on him again but Kesri was defiant. 'You wanted me to resign. I have done it,' he said adding that now it was up to him to convene the AICC session.

Prasada, who was the party's vice president, took charge. He told Pranab, Antony and others that the time for 'direct action' had come.

A day before Kesri was unceremoniously removed, Prasada hosted a lunch at which thirteen of the twenty CWC members were present. In their presence, Pranab produced a strongly worded draft resolution that asked Kesri to immediately convene a CWC meet to end the uncertainty in the wake of his decision to resign as the party chief. The resolution said that Kesri's gesture had bewildered party workers all over the country and that he should step down in Sonia's favour.

On 14 March 1998, 24 Akbar Road was a mute witness to a coup that saw the rather unsavoury exit of an 'elected' Congress president. Kesri was so upset with the day's events that he kicked his loyal Pomeranian, Ruchi. The ailing Kesri, then seventy-nine, had arrived at the CWC meeting at 24 Akbar Road convinced that a party president could not be forced out. He did not know that before the 11 a.m. meeting, most CWC members had gathered at Pranab's home to endorse two crucial statements. The first was an ultimatum asking Kesri to step down; the second, a resolution replacing him with Sonia Gandhi.

The moment Kesri stepped into the hall, he knew something was amiss. Loyalist Tariq Anwar was the only one who stood up to greet him. After Kesri sat down, Pranab began reading out a resolution 'thanking' him for his services and invoking Clause J of Article 19 of the Congress constitution.

A horrified Kesri listened to its provisions: the CWC could act beyond its constitutional powers in 'special situations' as long as it got the decision ratified by the AICC within six months. Party leaders later admitted that the provision did not specifically say that an elected party president could be removed with its help.

'*Arre yeh kya keh rahe ho* (Hey, what are you saying)!' was all Kesri could say when he found his voice. But there was a smirk on the faces of his colleagues. Kesri raved against the 'unconstitutional' meeting and loudly protested that he was still the Congress chief. But Prasada, the vice president of the party was already announcing, to thunderous applause, that 'Madam Sonia Gandhi' was their new leader.

The axed president stormed out, followed by Anwar. He spent more than an hour in his office, calling up his advisors, but it was already getting difficult to hear them amid the crackers and slogans welcoming Sonia. When Kesri stepped out of the room, his name board was missing, already replaced by a computer printout that said: 'Congress President Sonia Gandhi'.

Within minutes, the Special Protection Group moved into the party headquarters. By the time Sonia arrived for the day's second CWC meeting, party leaders who used to drive in had been told to get out of their cars on the street and walk in.

When Kesri reached his Purana Qila residence, he was in no mood for Ruchi's joyous welcome. However, the moment he kicked her, he was overwhelmed by remorse. The finest of biscuits – presented to Kesri during his tenure – were offered to the puzzled pooch.

When Sonia, the new party chief, arrived a few hours later to comfort him, Kesri rushed to greet her. Neither mentioned the 'coup'.

Sonia sought Kesri's blessings and guidance, and the old man puffed up with pleasure. By 7 p.m., he was singing paeans to the Nehru–Gandhis while promising to get even with Pranab, Prasada and Arjun.

While Congress leaders hailed Sonia's appointment, Khare lashed out at the constitutional coup. He remarked in *The Hindu*:

'The constitutional coup was hailed widely as restoring the party's leadership back to the site of its only natural entitlement – the Nehru-Gandhi family. When the historians get to chronicle the import of that eventful day, most of the honourable men of the Congress would be shown to have acted way less than honourably; even those who owned their rehabilitation and place in the CWC to the old man had no qualms in abandoning him. The transition that day cast the Congress once again in the dynastic mold, and the consequences are visible.'

Kesri has had the dubious distinction of being manhandled twice inside 24 Akbar Road. The first time was on 14 March 1998 when the party bosses shunted out the 'elected' party chief unceremoniously. (Some unidentified party-workers booed him and even tried to pull off his dhoti when Kesri was returning home.)

A year later, on 19 May 1999, Kesri went to 24 Akbar Road to attend a CWC meet. The atmosphere was charged in the wake of Sharad Pawar, P.A. Sangma and Tariq Anwar's revolt against Sonia, citing her foreign origins. Sonia had resigned in a huff, but returned when the dissident trio was thrown out of the party.

The CWC meeting was preceded by dramatic scenes at the Congress headquarters, where Kesri was manhandled by an agitated crowd. His car was damaged and the veteran leader had to return home to change his torn kurta, cap and dhoti. Kesri, who was a special invitee to the CWC, was targeted because of his proximity to Anwar. Prasada and Pilot were also roughed up because of their alleged sympathy for Pawar, Sangma and Anwar.

While Congressmen seemed least concerned about the treatment meted out to Kesri, Khare again sounded disturbed. Writing in *The Hindu*, he said:

'That planned roughing up was administered to the old man just as the Congress Working Committee members were arriving at 24 Akbar Road to discuss and expel the Sharad Pawar—P.A.Sangma—Tariq Anwar trio for daring to "challenge" Mrs Sonia Gandhi. Someone had decided that Kesri – as also others – was among the 'suspects' lacking in hundred per cent loyalty to the leadership. That evening, the country silently watched the physical humiliation of Kesri

and drew its own conclusions about the Congress and its leadership; there was a disagreeable note to that evening of May 20, and put in place rough attitudes, which inhibit wholesomeness in decision-making. Though the Congressmen failed to protest this organized hooliganism and all that it symbolized, the electorate had its say soon in the general elections (1999 Lok Sabha polls, in which the Congress performed miserably).'

During the two more years that he lived after this, Kesri would often say: 'Congress leadership *tapte hue suraj ke samaan hai. Bahut paas jaoge to jal jaoge aur bahut door rahoge to thand se mar jaoge* (The Congress leadership is like the blazing sun. Get too close and you'll be burnt, stay too far away and you'll freeze to death).'

Kesri died a disturbed and disillusioned man. He could not reconcile himself to his unceremonial ouster. There was much that he wanted to say, but he suffered an asthma attack and then slipped into a coma. Kesri's end came on 24 October 2000. He was eighty-one. His faithful dog Ruchi died the same evening.

Khare mourned Kesri's death:

'In Kesri's death, the Congress lost its most unapologetic advocate of the Mandal politics,' Khare commented in *The Hindu* adding, 'His death weakens the Congress's collective instinct for maintaining and strengthening bridges with the "backward" constituency.'

chapter seven

The Return of Gandhi

Sonia Gandhi stood on the banks of the River Ganga, looking into the distance, her spectacles in her hand. She wore a simple white handloom sari. Her beautiful face, which had known both incredible love and incredible tragedy, looked spent. A Mahila Congress worker came to her and tapped her gently on her shoulder, saying, '*Chalein*?' (Shall we go?)

Sonia looked at the party worker blankly. Her mind was elsewhere, lost in the hundreds of images that crowded it. Images from the cold and foggy winter morning of 27 January 1968, when she had first arrived in India, to the rites her son Rahul and she had performed minutes ago – scattering Rajiv Gandhi's ashes in the Ganga, which Rajiv's grandfather, Jawaharlal Nehru, had aptly described as the river of India – 'beloved of her people, round which are intertwined her memories, her hopes and fears, her songs of triumph, her victories and her defeats. She has been a symbol of India's age-long culture and civilization, ever changing, ever flowing, and yet ever the same Ganga'.

There were many more images in Sonia's mind. The glory of India and the contribution of the Nehru–Gandhi family, her belief in the country of her husband and her resolve to remain in India until the last.

It was in the city of Cambridge, some eighty kilometres north of London, that Rajiv and Sonia had met for the first time in 1965. Sonia, then a girl of eighteen, had come from Orbassano, near Turin in Italy, to study English at the Lennox Cook School of Languages, the most expensive and reputed school in Cambridge to offer proficiency courses to non-English speaking students.

Homesick and miserable, one Saturday evening, Sonia had gone to a Greek restaurant called Varsity on St Andrew Road, which was famous for its moussaka. She had been greeted by Charles Antoni, the tall handsome owner of Varsity. Sonia wanted a table by the window, but all the tables by the ground floor windows were taken so Charles led the young woman through the restaurant, past the round table in front of the cashier's desk, where a group of Indian and Pakistani students – Rajiv and Sanjay Gandhi, Deep Kaul, Syed Mehmood, Tahir Jahangir and Suhail Iftekhar – were animatedly discussing politics.

As Sonia walked past, Rajiv glanced at her and was smitten. For Sonia, too, it was love at first sight. Sensing that both were mesmerized, a common friend, Christian, did the needful – he introduced them to each other.

According to Jahangir, when Sonia passed by their table, all conversation halted.

'Soon the conversation resumed, but I noticed that Rajiv was lost in thought and did not participate. He had a dazed expression on his face. He got hold of a paper napkin and a Biro and carefully began to write out a poem on the napkin. He then called Charles over and asked him to get the best bottle of wine the Varsity had. Rajiv then requested Charles to personally go up to the girls, present the bottle of wine, pour it out, and present the napkin with the poem to the girl who was introduced as Sonia Maino and, to top it all, belt out an aria!' (Kidwai, Rasheed, *Sonia – A Biography*, Penguin, 2009.)

When Rajiv was prime minister, Charles Antoni landed up in Delhi for a short break. He flew in at his own expense but was detained at the Delhi airport. He did not have a valid visa. Charles had a ready explanation: he had not expected a friend of the Gandhis to require a visa, he said. The airport authorities initially thought him to be a prankster but reluctantly allowed him to make a telephone call.

Half-an-hour later, the immigration officers were seen offering a chair and a Cola to Charles as the prime minister's office had confirmed him an 'esteemed guest'. Charles left the airport in a white Ambassador for 7 Race Course Road as a personal guest of the prime minister. The Gandhis took good care of him. He spent a magnificent weekend in Goa and spent the rest of the week sightseeing in Delhi and Agra.

Charles passed away in July 2010; the news of his demise saddened Sonia hugely.

Little has changed in the small, sylvan university town since that Saturday evening in 1965 when Sonia Maino first visited Varsity restaurant on St Andrew's Road for dinner, and three years later, became Sonia Gandhi.

Life in Cambridge was fun. Rajiv shared an apartment at 28 Derwent Close with Arun Singh and Deep Kaul, son of former diplomat T.N. Kaul. They had pooled their resources to buy a beat-up Volkswagen Beetle that used to break down with alarming frequency and Rajiv, who was studying engineering at Trinity College, would repair it. Michael Albuquerque, who was Rajiv's contemporary at Cambridge, recalled how they all had to do odd jobs to supplement their income:

'We were all bound by the Government of India's restriction of

being allowed only 600 pounds for an entire stint. Rajiv worked at everything from baking bread, selling ice-cream to digging roads,' Albuquerque recalled adding, 'At one stage, he (Rajiv) was given a prize for baking the most amount of bread.' (Chatterjee, Rupa, *Sonia Gandhi: The Lady in the Shadow,* 1998.)

Sonia had a local host, an Italian woman called Patina who was then in her fifties. Patina, who lived with her Pakistani boyfriend Saleem, owned several bed-and-breakfast houses for students. Sonia leased a room from Patina's property at 59 Tennyson Row near the station. Sonia also stayed for a short duration at 65 Lensfield Road next to a pub called Spread Eagle.

Rajiv and Sonia often went to watch movies while at Cambridge. One of the first films they saw together was *Pather Panchali* by the renowned filmmaker Satyajit Ray. Sometimes they went punting on the river Cam. They enjoyed dancing, and preferred going for sumptuous high teas to drinking. At this juncture, Sonia had no idea of Rajiv's political position in India. Rajiv used to parry questions about whether he was related to Mahatma Gandhi. In Simi Garewal's film *Rajiv's India,* Rajiv explained, 'I was embarrassed at being my grandfather's grandson.'

It was only when a friend of Sonia's showed her a newspaper photograph of the visiting Indian prime minister that she realized that the Gandhis were *the* politicians of India.

Looking back over the years, more images crossed Sonia's mind as she gazed upon the Ganga... The carefree life at Cambridge had come to an abrupt end when Rajiv left his mechanical engineering course and started flying lessons in London and New Delhi. Sonia also finished her course and returned to Orbassano. But before that, she had an all-important meeting with her to-be mother-in-law – Indira Gandhi.

Indira was extremely eager to meet Sonia. And she had every reason to be. Her son, Rajiv, ever shy by nature, had written to her confessing: 'I am quite sure I am in love with her. Everything seems to point to that.'

On the day they were to meet for the first time, however, Sonia worked herself up into such a state of nerves on her way to London that Rajiv had to take her back to Cambridge. The woman in Indira fully understood Sonia's apprehensions. The following day, Sonia met Indira at the residence of the Indian high commissioner in London.

According to Sonia (Gandhi, Sonia, *Rajiv,* Penguin/Viking, New Delhi, 1992), Indira's first words to her, spoken in French, greatly comforted her. She said, 'Sonia, I am a mother, do not be scared of

me. I know what it is to love a man from a different community and religion. So I can understand how you feel. Please do not worry.'

Another gesture of Indira's touched Sonia deeply. As she was preparing for an evening party, Sonia discovered that her hem had got caught in her heel and had come undone. Indira immediately called for a needle and thread and said, 'You're very lucky, it's right on the seam.' She then proceeded to thread the needle with a steady hand.

Embarrassed and touched, Sonia murmured that she would fix her hem herself. Indira smiled broadly and cracked a light joke. She asked Sonia to tell her the difference between an everyday mother and herself. When Sonia paused for a second, Indira replied, 'Nothing'. Then she added: 'We both want the same thing – to see our children happy. Since Feroze's death, I have not seen my son smile the way he does since the day he met you. It makes my heart glad.'

In November 1966, Rajiv had travelled to Italy to meet Sonia's family. He met Sonia's father, Stephano, who had fought in Russia with the Germans. Her father's all-time hero was Il Duce, Benito Mussolini, and he took great pride in claiming that he belonged to the Salo Republic set up by Mussolini.

Russia was the reason Stephano Maino called his daughter Sonia. Stephano had been captured and detained as a prisoner-of-war for several years in the towns of Vladimir and Suzdal till three Russian women, Nadia, Anushka and Sonia, reportedly helped him escape. Little wonder then that he gave his three daughters Russian names in honour of the campaign in which he fought.

Stephano was hard-working and disciplined – qualities he passed on to his family, especially to Sonia. When he arrived in the small Italian town of Orbassano, he worked as a mason and made good in a small construction business through his dedication and reputation for fair dealing. Stephano brought up his daughters in the old traditional way – church, confirmation and communion.

Stephano was deeply impressed by Rajiv, though he was opposed to his daughter marrying him. He doubted his daughter's ability to live in an 'alien' country, with a different people and different customs. He tried to dissuade Sonia from marrying Rajiv, saying she was too young to know her mind yet.

When he failed to convince Sonia, her mother, Paola, played peacemaker. One day, she suggested that Stephano not oppose the marriage per se, but seek to buy time till Sonia turned twenty-one. If her feelings for Rajiv remained unchanged, she could travel to India to see for herself the customs and traditions that she would have to follow. Stephano agreed reluctantly.

That year – 1967 – was a most difficult year for Sonia and Rajiv, but it cemented their love. They communicated through letters and

cards. Sonia was unafraid because she had complete faith in her love for Rajiv. As she later wrote:

'When you love someone, love gives you a tremendous amount of strength. Once you have gained that strength, you are not scared of anything. You just want the person you love… I just wanted Rajiv. I could have gone to any part of the world for him. He was my biggest security. I would not think of anything or anyone except him.' (Gandhi, Sonia, *Rajiv,* Penguin/Viking, New Delhi, 1992.)

It is perhaps safe to presume that it was her love for Rajiv that brought Sonia to India, and allowed him to join politics in 1980 because she realized that he had to fulfil his duties towards his mother. In 1984, no doubt it was her love for Rajiv that made her agree to him becoming prime minister much against her wishes because she felt he had a duty to perform. Years later, during 1997–98, she was drawn into politics because she could not bear to see the disintegration of the party Rajiv had revered so much.

Soon after Rajiv and Sonia's wedding on 25 February 1968, her mother, Paola, left for Orbassano. Sonia felt lonely and depressed. Her love for Rajiv had only increased, but she found that she had to make many adjustments as Indira's daughter-in-law. By Sonia's own admission, she had difficulty coping with the hundreds of piercing eyes that confronted her each time she stepped out of the house.

Food and language were the second challenge. Slowly, she started liking *daal-chaawal* and *achaar*. Some of Indira's close associates like Usha Bhagat, Pupul Jayakar and Mohsina Kidwai remember how the otherwise formidable Indira became dependent on Sonia in all matters pertaining to the household. In 1985, *Dharmayug,* a respected Hindi magazine, wrote an article on Sonia and remarked on how 'Sonia has merged completely wth Rajiv and Indira like the waters of Yamuna and Ganga.'

Dharmayug editor Pushpa Bharti, who was well known to Indira and Teji Bachchan, commented that Sonia came to understand her mother-in-law early on in her married life. Her Italian upbringing came in handy as she had been brought up in a close-knit and conservative environment, in which family values were accorded top priority. Pushpa said Indira was deeply moved by Sonia's simplicity, retiring demeanour and reticent nature. She never found Sonia possessive of Rajiv. Khushwant Singh, who was a regular visitor to Indira's home during and after the Emergency, said he found Sonia to be more conventional Hindu wife material than Maneka.

On her part, Sonia enjoyed playing the role of the daughter-in-law

in Indira's household. She often acted as Indira's social secretary, helping her select saris, picking up gifts for visiting dignitaries, and looking after personal guests in the prime minister's residence. Indira was particularly delighted by Sonia's selection of an ankle-length coat of quilted Rajasthani fabric with a matching pouch. Indira wore it to the opening of the Festival of India in London. Another time, Sonia selected a golden sari with a Kashmiri embroidered border for her to wear to the opening of the Commonwealth Group of Ministers' meeting in Delhi.

In June 1985, Sonia gave a long and detailed interview to Pushpa Bharti saying she had learnt to observe fasts from her mother-in-law: 'In the beginning, Mummy (Indira) used to fast on Mondays; I did the same. Then she switched to another day. I followed suit. Actually if two people are fasting in the house, it's convenient for the kitchen work if they fast on the same day. Even now I have a fixed day. Mummy used to say you should sacrifice something you like very much for God. Everyone likes food, so I offer one day's food to God. It makes me feel good.'

About her relationship with Indira, Sonia commented:

'A lot of my friends have problems with their respective mothers-in-law. But I never had any such problems because my upbringing was totally different. Since childhood, I had been told that my husband would be superior to me and my mother-in-law, being his mother, would be so much superior.'

She added:

'A man is the object of his mother's love for twenty-five to twenty-six years. You cannot expect him to switch all his love to you suddenly. It just would not be right. You should also extend some understanding towards your mother-in-law, you cannot expect her to change overnight. If she is possessive about her son, you must give her time to adjust. During this period of adjustment, if you stand by her and extend your support, your relationship will never flounder… Mummy (Indira) and I were always very close. I was always understanding of her, and she always showered me with love.' (*Dharmayug*, 15 June 1985.)

Sonia also spoke very fondly about her mother-in-law in a television interview with Shekhar Gupta in May 2004 for NDTV's Walk-the-Talk programme:

'She was a very strong woman, but she had a very gentle side to her…a side that very few people know. She had an eye for detail. If someone was unhappy or unwell, she would immediately notice and she would immediately do something about it, perhaps by jotting down two lines. I remember when I got married, my mother came to the wedding and she stayed for a month. And when she was going,

obviously it was a sad moment for me. And my mother-in-law sent a little note to me: “Hi Sonia, this is just to tell you that we all love you”. And that totally melted me. It gave me a lot of strength that I am loved and cared for.’

The period following the Emergency was extremely tough for the Gandhis. Out of power and facing a battery of allegations, Indira had to move out of her Safdarjung Road residence to the much smaller and more modest 12 Willingdon Crescent house. The family cook died in a road accident in Allahabad and Indira was too scared to find a new one. According to Pupul Jayakar, Indira feared that the man would be used by her detractors as a spy or to poison her family and her.

During these trying times, Sonia took over and cooked for several months till a new cook was found. She was seen frequently at Delhi’s Khan Market, shopping for vegetables, meat and groceries. In the back garden of their Willingdon Crescent house, Sonia started growing broccoli, spinach, okra, *lauki,* coriander, chillies and lemon. She personally chose the seeds and monitored the growth of the plants. When the fresh vegetables made their way to the dinner table, Sanjay praised her lavishly, calling her Indira’s ‘model *bahu*’.

Family friend Mohammad Yunus recalled receiving small notes from Indira, saying, ‘Rajiv and Sonia have been extremely helpful and supportive. God bless them all.’ Sonia and Rajiv tried to defend their family in Delhi’s social circles, but met with hostility wherever they went.

The trying period ended when Indira stormed back to power in January 1980. Indira was back as prime minister and the family once again moved into 1 Safdarjung Road in New Delhi. But Sanjay’s tragic death on 23 June 1980 brought an end to this short interlude of relative respite.

Sonia and Rajiv were on holiday in Italy when Sanjay died. Romesh Bhandari, a senior Indian Foreign Service official contacted them and industrialist Swaraj Paul sent a special plane to fly them home. In Sanjay’s death, Sonia not only lost a close relative, but also a friend. Sonia always viewed Sanjay as a gentle, sensitive family man, who had a great eye for detail and desired perfection at all times. According to her, the media’s portrayal of Sanjay as haughty and ruthless was scripted by his political opponents.

The death of Sanjay created a huge void for Indira. He was not only Indira’s son but her closest political aide. Sonia was disturbed by how crushed Indira was by his death. She wrote: ‘For my mother-in-law, it was a devastating blow. She had lost not only a beloved son, but also her most trusted aide.’ (Gandhi, Sonia, *Rajiv,* Penguin/Viking 1992.)

Though Sonia had an intense dislike for politics at that stage, she understood Indira's need for Rajiv in the political arena. She told Shekhar Gupta that she had never imagined either Rajiv or herself ever being in politics: 'I never imagined that. I had just come here for marrying Rajivji. And that never crossed my mind or my husband's mind for that matter.'

She however overcame her strong dislike for politics because of her love for Rajiv and Indira. While Sonia had no ambition outside her family, she was possessive of her proximity to Indira. According to Pupul Jaykar, after the autumn of 1980, her relationship changed from that of a daughter-in-law to the role of a daughter. 'The vacuum of Sanjay had to be filled by someone for Indira, who needed physical closeness and support, which Sonia provided. Right from making camomile tea if the prime minister had a headache to providing a warm tub of water to soak her aching feet after a day-long tour, Sonia literally did "seva" and looked after her mother-in-law.'

In June 1981, Rajiv won the Amethi by-election. His political commitments were such that Rajiv had little time for Sonia or the kids and for his old interests like flying, pets, and photography.

This period saw him writing lots of letters to Sonia. These letters were written in between meetings or when Rajiv was travelling by air. In one letter, he said:

'Like Hindu traditions say, a man is only half a person and his wife makes up for the other half. I feel exactly like that. I know that without you, I would find it very difficult…even more so now that I am in politics.'

Rajiv's entry into politics saw Sonia relinquishing her old attire. She gave up her T-shirts, jeans, long skirts and Western suits. She became extremely careful about her appearance in public. She was always seen carefully turned out in chic salwar-kameezes and printed cotton and handloom saris. Sonia and Rajiv accompanied the prime minister on several tours abroad – to Fiji, USA, Australia, Mexico, England, etc. Sonia and Rajiv attended the royal wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer in July 1981 as Indira's personal emissaries.

Indira could not help noticing the change in Sonia's sartorial preferences. She asked Sonia if Pupul Jayakar or Usha Bhagat had spoken to her about her clothes. Sonia smiled and said no. Indira, however, told her that even if anyone had suggested such a thing, she should feel 'free and comfortable' in whatever she wanted to wear.

Indira later told a personal friend:

'It is amazing the ease with which she adapts herself. Look at her! Now she has an aura that was not there before. I suppose that comes when you are no longer just married to an individual, but to the

family, values, society and country.'

Years later, Sonia spoke passionately about Indira and India at The Hague while delivering a lecture on 'Living Politics: What India Has Taught Me', organized by the Nexus Institute at Tilburg University. Of her personal voyage and her growth as a politician she said:

'My journey from the placid backwaters of a contented domestic life to the maelstrom of public life has not been an easy one. Despite its sorrows and difficulties, I have found in my new existence both fulfilment and a larger sense of purpose.'

Referring to the Nehru–Gandhi family, she said:

'The family to which I first pledged my fidelity was in the confines of a home. Today, my loyalty embraces a wider family – India, my country, whose people have so generously welcomed me to become one of them.' She added that she joined active politics to defeat the forces threatening the essence of India, though she did not name the main Opposition party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). 'Democracy was making India much more egalitarian, but it was also giving new power to some old forces – forces that sought to polarize and mobilize communities along religious lines. They threatened the very essence of India, the diversity of faiths and cultures, languages and ways of life that have sprung from its soil and taken root in it.'

Tracing her own political transformation she said:

'The Congress Party was being buffeted by these currents… It now found itself in the midst of uncertainty and turmoil. In 1996, it lost the national elections. Pressure began to build up from a large number of Congress workers across the country urging me to emerge from my seclusion and enter public life. Could I stand aside and watch as the forces of bigotry continued in their campaigns to spread division and discord? Could I ignore my own commitment to the values and principles of the family I had married into, values and principles for which they lived and died? Could I betray that legacy and turn away from it? I knew my own limitations, but I could no longer stand aside. Such were the circumstances under which the life of politics chose me.'

Sonia answered those who criticized what they termed 'the politics of dynasty' by saying:

'At times, people refer to the Nehru-Gandhi "dynasty". What this word fails to signify is two crucial elements. One is the sovereignty of the people. Through the democratic process, they have repeatedly vested their expectations in one or another member, and equally, on other occasions, they have chosen to withdraw their support. The other essential factor, one that lies at the heart of this relationship, is not the exercise of power, but the affirmation of a sacred trust. It is

this love and faith that imposes its own responsibility and obligations that has inspired even a reluctant politician such as me to enter the public domain.'

In February 1997, Sonia and Rajiv's daughter, Priyanka, married Robert Vadra. Sonia was now perhaps even lonelier than before. This period also coincided with Congress president Sitaram Kesri's flirtation with power play. Kesri was never really respected by the members of his party.

A group of Congressmen claiming to be loyal to Rajiv called on Sonia. The group, which included Digvijaya Singh, Ashok Gehlot and Ahmed Patel, told her that if she did not intervene, the party would lose its name, identity and primacy in Indian politics. The BJP was painted as a villain, a threat to the security and integrity of the nation. Presentations were made. These leaders spoke in a language that left Sonia thinking. She is said to have broached the subject with her closest friends and advisors, Rahul and Priyanka. Both admitted that there were huge erosions within the party. It was time for decisive action.

But Sonia played safe, announcing initially that she would merely campaign to strengthen the party's fortunes. But the moment she crossed the threshold, she realized that there was no scope for limited intervention. Rahul stepped in here to provide more support. As Priyanka was already married, the young man offered to quit his London-based consultancy job with *Monitor* to be with her. Thus, the move to draft Rahul into politics dated back to March 1998, though Congressmen saw it materialize only in 2004.

The period from March 1998 to May 2004 saw Sonia's grit and commitment towards the Congress. The party remained ill-equipped both in terms of resources and leadership style.

Soon after taking over as the party chief, Sonia convened a three-day brainstorming session at the hill resort of Pachmarhi in Madhya Pradesh, where a 'declaration' was prepared after engaging in deliberations.

The declaration was of immense significance to the Congress and the polity of the nation. Under Sonia, the Congress resolved to launch an ideological crusade against communalism and to meet the challenge of divisive forces unflinchingly, including shortsighted powerbrokers and strange bedfellows coming together for power and pelf. The party was no longer a rudderless ship without a conscientious captain. In her brief interventions, Sonia spoke well and perceptively. She acknowledged that 'differences are unavoidable and,

indeed, desirable'. (*The Tribune,* 8 September 1998.) She understood from first-hand experience that the Congress was increasingly a parliamentary party and not a mass-based organization. Its roots, however, appeared to be deeper and broader than those of other parties, but these were decaying and dying organic parts.

Sonia followed up the Pachmarhi meet with annual conclaves of chief ministers that were held in places such as Delhi, Guwahati, Mount Abu and Nainital. The aim of these conclaves was not to monitor the functioning of the Congress-ruled states; rather, they served to familiarize Sonia with the finer points of governance and to prepare her for more important assignments in the future.

For instance, an insight into the two-day deliberations at Mount Abu on 10 and 11 November 2002 showed Sonia donning two caps – one of teacher and the other of student. The Congress chief, who lacked experience in public life and high academic qualifications, exhibited keen interest in drafting 'people-oriented policies' and repeatedly quoted noted economist Amartya Sen.

At the hill resort, away from the public glare, Sonia supervised in-depth and thorough discussions on subjects ranging from the state's role in ensuring clean drinking water, power supply and health services to more complex issues such as the empowerment of Dalits and women and reforms in the Kyoto Treaty.

On national security, the former director of the Intelligence Bureau, M.K. Narayanan, pointed out the need to change the 'mindset' about insurgency problems in the Northeast and Kashmir. Narayanan later served as national security advisor when the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) came to power in 2004. He said there had been no major labour unrest in the country in the last thirty years because of the general improvement in economic growth, even in rural areas. If this trend was given impetus by adding employment opportunities, it would have been a different story in the Northeast and Kashmir.

Narayanan cautioned against the state's tendency to label a section of society, be it minorities or linguistic groups, as 'miscreants' or 'trouble-makers'. He told Sonia that it was the duty of the state to look after the welfare of all sections of society.

Ravi Parthasarthy, an expert on infrastructure, said that the number of children dying due to waterborne diseases in India in a year was more than the number of children killed in Iraq over a period of ten years due to the economic sanctions imposed during Saddam Hussein's rule. On the issue of water and power supply, Parthasarthy said there was an urgent need to change 'regressive laws' such as uniform water and power charges for the rich and the poor. More than four lakh villages in India lack clean drinking water even after over sixty years of independence. The quality of water in urban

areas is steadily deteriorating, leading to an increase in waterborne diseases and deaths. According to Parthasarthy, it was both naïve and impractical to expect privatization to work wonders in this area. Village panchayats and *nagar palikas* (city municipal corporations) should be used for community services where different tariff charges could be introduced at the local level.

Speaking on gender inequality, educationist A.K. Shiv Kumar said it was shocking to note that even in 2002, twenty-five million women in India go 'missing' because of poor health services and discrimination. He accused the political class of 'criminal negligence' on the issue. Kumar presented several facts and figures to substantiate his point that political parties were merely 'indulging' in tokenism instead of addressing the real issues women faced. He said the feminist slogan, 'All issues are women's issues', has an equally important corollary: 'Women's issues are everyone's issues'. While most Congress leaders and some chief ministers were occasionally caught dozing, Sonia remained alert and attentive and sat through all the discussions.

However, over time, Sonia began losing interest in organizational matters. CWC meetings, which were held at regular intervals earlier, became less frequent after October 2003. At first, it was several days, which became weeks and then months before the party's apex decision-making body met to deliberate on vital national and international issues. There was no fixed schedule for the meetings, but during 1998–2002, there used to be at least a dozen CWC meetings in a year.

Congressmen remain intrigued by why Sonia chose to bypass the CWC, which is packed with 'loyalists'. It is in sharp contrast to her style of functioning. After she took over as the party chief in March 1998, there were dozens of meetings every year and the trend continued till 2000, by when she had an iron grip over all the party organs. Since then, the CWC meetings have become few and far between.

A close Sonia aide claims the leadership's 'indifferent' attitude towards the CWC grew when she realized that the body, which had more than forty members, had become too 'unwieldy and ungainly' for any meaningful or focused discussion. Sonia's supporters agree that it is impossible to hold any crisp and quick discussions in the CWC.

According to the Congress constitution, the CWC should have had twenty-four members; before Sonia's amendment, it had twenty members. But during the most part of her tenure, Sonia packed it with numerous special and permanent invitees, including the chief ministers of the Congress-ruled states.

Next, Sonia began the practice of summoning important leaders like Manmohan Singh, Shivraj Patil, Ahmed Patel and Pranab Mukherjee, usually present in Delhi, for consultations before taking any important decision. Nobody complained about why CWC meetings were not being held because the decision-making process continued.

The traditionalists in the party, however, were dismayed. They pointed out that even in the heady days of the Nehru– Gandhi–Bose standoffs, the CWC used to meet at regular intervals. 'It used to meet regularly amid heated exchanges. Good practices and traditions should not be ignored,' said an old-timer. Several others echoed this sentiment. A senior CWC member said political exigencies demanded regular CWC meetings. 'The CWC resolutions and deliberations make an impact and have a greater ring of credibility. What we say collectively is taken far more seriously than routine statements from the party spokesmen,' said a leader from Madhya Pradesh.

Instead, Sonia set up innumerable committees meant to review and tone up the functioning of the Congress. The first of these was the task force headed by P.A. Sangma in 1998 to generate ideas to rejuvenate the party. In 2008, she put together another panel, called the Future Challenges Committee, which consisted of Rahul Gandhi, Digvijaya Singh, Jairam Ramesh and others. Then there were dozens of committees to look into the poll debacles in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Punjab.

These committees achieved little. They often met at 24 Akbar Road, had tea and went through some files and papers. But decision-making and the execution of programmes continued to be the monopoly of a group of persons close to the Congress president. The Sangma task force's report dealt at length with organizational problems and came up with numerous suggestions. However, their implementation has been ad hoc and cosmetic at best. Sangma suggested that the party's insistence on 'wearing khadi' be done away with. But the old guard felt slighted by his suggestion.

Years later, when Rahul spontaneously echoed the same sentiments about the 'practical problem' of compulsorily wearing khadi, the young general secretary was forced to clarify that khadi symbolized the party's commitment against economic exploitation. The Congress membership form continues to urge its forty-million-odd ordinary members to stay away from liquor and to not accumulate assets beyond known sources of income.

Sangma did succeed in getting rid of the Indian style of sitting, reclining on *masnads*, during CWC meets. Proper office chairs and tables replaced the white sheets, mats and *masnads* to give a semblance of boardroom culture. The party also did away with the post of AICC joint secretary and replaced it with that of secretary.

Similarly, though various general secretaries and secretaries have been put in charge of organizational matters in individual states, there are complaints that the party president's tour programmes are organized without proper consultation with the state units. The nomination of candidates for the Rajya Sabha elections was also criticized for lack of consultation with the respective state units.

Other committees, such as the constitution review committee headed by K. Karunakaran and the ethical and moral committee headed by A.K. Antony, failed to submit any concrete suggestions. There was a feeling among some members of these committees that their work was not being taken seriously. The foreign and defence affairs committee, headed by K. Natwar Singh, was embarrassed after the Pokhran nuclear tests, when its initial reaction of questioning the timing of the tests was virtually negated by Sonia Gandhi herself after a meeting with Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Sonia went on record to praise the tests and link them with the initiatives of past Congress governments on the nuclear research front. However, this stance changed later and the party returned to the position adopted by the foreign and defence affairs committee.

At 24 Akbar Road, Sonia appeared in the Rajiv mould and placed greater emphasis on the written word than on verbal communication. She insisted upon 'concept notes' and 'written briefs' as were in vogue during the Rajiv years.

In spite of these shortcomings, on 13 May 2004, Sonia turned the tables. Slowly, she brought in sweeping changes in the way the Congress organization was functioning. On a more significant count, the ideological foundation for the economic reforms and secularism was firmed up. Sonia put a stop to the Nehru–Gandhi practice of playing musical chairs with the chief ministers of the party-ruled states. She believed in and practised transparency in the organizational set-up. As a result, dissident activities, which had eroded the party's support base during the Rao and Kesri eras, became things of the past. Unlike Indira and Rajiv, Sonia had not been brought up in a prime minister's house nor groomed as a successor to a towering leader. So she lacked a sense of entitlement and remained wary of flattery.

Sonia differed significantly from her predecessors in several important respects. In matters of governance, even when the Congress was out of office, Sonia began the practice of calling meetings of the chief ministers of Congress-ruled states. The first such conclave took place at 24 Akbar Road, where Sonia, sceptical of bureaucracy, posed searching questions to chief ministers Digvijaya Singh, Ashok Gehlot, Ajit Jogi and others. Sonia also introduced a culture of NGO-style

functioning, emphasizing that the gains of prosperity should be passed on to villagers and the poor. The results of this move included the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, the Right to Information Act and loan waivers for farmers.

By January 2004, Rahul started to play a more visible role in political matters. He was seen to take a greater interest in the forthcoming elections, and was present at all strategy meets. His presence helped Sonia to consolidate her strength and further establish her political credentials. It was Rahul who prevailed upon Sonia to go 'all out' on her 'roadshows' before the 2004 general elections. Rahul's reasoning was that one had to go and mingle with the masses to understand the people's minds and to get a better understanding of their specific needs. Public meetings and political rallies that were attended mostly by hired crowds were of little benefit.

Rahul's entry in politics coincided with the entry of the other Gandhi scion, Varun Gandhi, the son of Sanjay and Maneka. A member of the BJP, Varun had travelled to Nagpur a few years earlier where a briefing on the days of pre- and post-independence activity by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh had left him shaken. Varun, who had just joined the BJP, was apparently greatly disturbed when he learnt about his great-grandfather and the politics of that era.

Before his visit to Nagpur, Varun had been trying to establish his roots. He had made numerous visits to Congress leaders of the Sanjay Gandhi era, but did not find the experience enriching. The leaders he met were polite, but cagey. His mother Maneka's 'not so pleasant' ties with Indira and Sonia are said to have restrained many from sharing Sanjay's vision and ideas with Varun.

The only Congress leader of some repute and experience who received him warmly was Sitaram Kesri. Dethroned and disillusioned, Kesri saw in Varun a potential challenger to those he blamed for his unceremonious exit. But before Varun could become a regular visitor to his Purana Qila Road home, Kesri died.

While the cousins avoided projecting themselves as rivals, their race began in contrasting styles and on opposite sides of the political spectrum. Varun, several years younger than Rahul, always seemed in a hurry to outshine and outscore his better-known cousin, who became the MP from Amethi. Varun wanted to enter the Lok Sabha in 2004, but fell short of the cutoff age of twenty-five by a few months. He tried hard to get a BJP ticket from Vidisha in a 2006 by-election to place himself on par with Rahul, so the two could be pitted against each other in Parliament. Again, he did not get a ticket.

Like Rahul, Varun identified Uttar Pradesh as his battleground. Sanjay Gandhi's son claimed to hold degrees from the London School

of Economics (LSE) and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). However, on 30 March 2009, the *Indian Express* ran a story with statements from administrators at the LSE and SOAS refuting the claim that Varun Gandhi held degrees from those institutions. Apparently, Varun's undergraduate degree was earned through the University of London External System. An Alumni Relations officer from SOAS stated: 'Feroze Varun Gandhi withdrew from his MSc programme at SOAS, and hence did not actually graduate from SOAS.'

Varun reacted to the *Express* story on 10 April 2009 and the paper published his response. Varun acknowledged that both were external degrees, sponsored by the institutions, and 'they enjoy exactly the same academic and intellectual standing as degrees awarded to internal candidates taught on-site'. He further said that he studied from India for personal reasons and to set an example for Indian students who can earn 'degrees without incurring the huge costs that travelling abroad entails for their families and the country's precious foreign exchange resources.' Varun insisted that both external degrees are sponsored by these institutions, taught according to their own internal standards and were examined by academics at the LSE and SOAS. 'These are not honorary degrees, nor are they available to purchase for a fee,' he said.

Initially, Varun had claimed that he was troubled by the prospect of joining the BJP, but said he had no choice. Varun later stunned the nation in March 2009, when he made some horribly tasteless remarks about Muslims at Pilibhit in Uttar Pradesh.

After a gap of several years, Varun called on Sonia on 15 February 2011. Varun had dropped by to invite Sonia Gandhi for his wedding on 6 March to Yamini Roy. A broad smile on his face, Varun told his aunt his marriage would be incomplete without the presence of a senior member of the family. Sonia, who had rushed out to greet her 'darling Varun', immediately brought out sweets to mark the happy occasion. Aunt and nephew then spent about half an hour chatting together; Sonia apparently teasing Varun about the fact that she had learnt he had personally picked out saris for his bride. However, Varun was disappointed that on his wedding day, Sonia, Priyanka and Rahul failed to make it to Varanasi. Priyanka reportedly called him up to apologize as she had a fever. Rahul had fractured his leg while Sonia's security officials reportedly vetoed the visit.

On 18 May 2004, when the Congress-led UPA was invited to form the government, Sonia stunned the nation by opting out of the race. She was the first democratically elected leader to decline the post of prime minister in the country. Appealing to her beseeching supporters to allow her to make her own decision, she said she was listening to the

call of her 'inner voice'.

Was she reluctant from day one? Was she unsure of leading a rainbow coalition consisting of unpredictable allies such as Laloo Prasad Yadav and Ram Vilas Paswan? A closer scrutiny shows that none of these factors influenced her while declining the country's most sought-after political job. Sonia was deeply perturbed by the idea of being challenged by a section of her countrymen, however small a minority, which was uncomfortable at the prospect of her becoming the prime minister of India. Sonia said she had no problems taking on leaders like Sushma Swaraj and Uma Bharti of the BJP, who had been vociferous against her becoming prime minister, but she had 'no strength' to be the 'cause' of a likely civil strife.

Sonia dreaded the prospect of Congress workers battling RSS activists over the issue of her origin. When Congress leaders tried to reassure her by saying that anyone raking up the issue would get a 'fitting' response, Sonia was further alarmed by the thought of riots breaking out or the prospect that somebody might set himself on fire because of her. Sonia was convinced that the office of prime minister was not worth the common man's sacrifice. In her view, the country needed drinking water, schools, basic health services, small scale industries and social security – not a debate centred on her origins. She said her association with the Nehru–Gandhi family had taught her one overriding principle – to put the country first.

Oscar Fernandes, an AICC functionary who became a minister in the Manmohan Singh government, said on several other occasions, too, Sonia had shown a similar sense of 'tyaag'. During 2003, when the party was in the Opposition, the AICC office-bearers had chalked out a nationwide one-day token strike, including a rail roko–raasta roko programme. Sonia heard them attentively even as Ambika Soni excitedly told her that such a stir would neutralize the media criticism that the Congress lacked 'teeth' as the Opposition. At the end of it, Sonia asked the party general secretaries one simple question: 'Who will be responsible if one patient dies failing to reach a hospital?' There was silence, recalled Fernandes, as the office-bearers searched for a suitable answer. 'We had none. The agitation plan was dropped.'

Those who know Sonia well were not surprised by her refusing the prime minister's post. Circumstances, they said, have trained Sonia in such a way that she is capable of taking tough decisions with relative ease.

On 18 May 2004, she listened to her conscience when she asked herself if the office of prime minister was worth alienating a section of her countrymen. Sonia tried to convince her party MPs and addressed them in the majestic Central Hall of Parliament.

Amid chaotic scenes and emotional outbursts, Sonia made a brief

speech, saying why she was 'humbly declining' the post. She said:

'Throughout these past six years that I have been in politics, one thing has been clear to me. And that is, as I have often stated, that the post of prime minister is not my aim. I was always certain that if ever I found myself in the position that I am in today, I would follow my own inner voice. Today, that voice tells me I must humbly decline this post. You have unanimously elected me. I must humbly decline this post. You have unanimously elected me your leader. In doing so, you have reposed your faith in me. It is this faith that has placed me under tremendous pressure to reconsider my decision. Yet, I must abide by the principles which have guided me all along. Power in itself has never attracted me, nor has position been my goal. My aim has always been to defend the secular foundation of our nation and the poor of our country – the creed sacred to Indiraji and Rajivji. We have moved forward a significant step towards this goal. We have waged a successful battle. But we have not won the war. That is a long and arduous struggle, and I will continue it with full determination. But I appeal to you to understand the force of my conviction. I request you to accept my decision and to recognize that I will not reverse it. Our foremost responsibility at this critical time is to provide India with a secular government that is strong and stable. Friends, you have given me your generous support, you have struggled against all odds with me. As one of you and as president of the Congress party, I pledge myself to work with you and for the country. My resolve will in fact be all the more firm, to fight for our principles, for our vision, and for our ideals.'

Sonia's choice for prime minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, was flawless. To the outside world, Manmohan Singh has the image of a distinguished economist, a man known for his integrity and knowledge. Within the Congress, he is a most popular figure, not because he is good at economics, but because he has never played 'politics' within the party. Manmohan Singh has consciously stayed away from factional politics. He has always remained by Sonia's side, yet nobody has ever dubbed him as being part of any 'coterie'. Congressmen say they could now understand why Sonia always kept Manmohan Singh by her side.

Manmohan Singh was made chairman of the strategy committee, ahead of a group of thoroughbred politicians such as Pranab Mukherjee and Arjun Singh. In the Rajya Sabha, too, Sonia appointed him leader of the Opposition on 21 March 1998. Sometimes, backbenchers would wonder why Sonia had promoted a rather 'apolitical' person in a house where the then ruling NDA was in a minority. Manmohan Singh, too, has never let Sonia down. The two functioned as a team that enjoyed instant rapport with and understood

each other well. Both are reticent, hate media attention, and avoid the old political culture of flattery and false promises.

For the outside world, Manmohan appeared to be Sonia's cipher, but in reality, she was in awe of him, always acknowledging his intellect and experience, and rarely involving herself in administrative matters. This was also evident in the manner in which she backed him on the Indo-US nuclear deal. Instead of siding with the Left leadership, which was offering itself as 'trusted friends', Sonia went along with Manmohan because she trusted his judgement. This was an important reason, why the division of power between the Congress president and the prime minister has clicked for so long from the years 2004 to 2013, and still counting. The Manmohan Singh government followed Sonia's broad agenda – liberal economics with an inclusive emphasis – and she has been content to let the prime minister get on with the job as he saw best.

Sonia avoided giving too many interviews or holding press conferences. Yet her politics showed glimpses of her political thinking. She appeared to have a deep and visceral dislike of communalism. This was evident in the manner in which she criticized the BJP's Hindutva agenda during the 2004 and 2009 election campaign. It was not merely an election or political rhetoric. Sonia seemed to mean every word of what she said. In terms of her leadership style, she had less of a sense of entitlement and remained deeply suspicious of flattery. She avoided developing a closed circle of acolytes. This was in sharp contrast to the post–Nehru conduct of most influential Congress leaders.

As leader of the UPA, Sonia has made concerted attempts to reach out to her political opponents. In doing so, she has followed the Nehruvian practice of setting aside political differences to bring a personal touch to her equations with politicians across party lines. She did this when she promptly called up Vajpayee, then prime minister, to inquire after his safety when terrorists attacked Parliament House in 2001, or when she urged former PM Chandra Shekhar to go for medical treatment, or when she sent an emissary on hearing that Amar Singh, then in the SP, had lost his father.

Sushma Swaraj, who had fought a bitter election against her in Bellary in 1999 and who in May 2004 had threatened to shave her head if Sonia were to became prime minister, has also mellowed down. Sushma, however, sought to take the credit for reaching out to Sonia. In January 2011, in a Walk-the-Talk TV interview with Shekhar Gupta for NDTV, she said:

‘When I became Parliamentary Affairs Minister, it started from there. I thought it was my duty as Minister of Parliamentary Affairs to call on the then leader of Opposition and she was the leader of the Opposition at that time. So I went and called on her at her residence. It started from there and I think she is reciprocating that now.’

Sushma added: ‘Earlier, she (Sonia) was very quiet, she never used to speak, she very rarely smiled and she was not interactive. Now she interacts, now she has opened up.’

When the 83rd session of the All India Congress Committee (AICC) plenary took place at Burari, New Delhi, it ended on a high note as it re-established the supremacy of the Sonia–Rahul–Manmohan troika, helped the grand old party overcome the enormity of the Bihar assembly defeat, and dispelled some of the concerns over the 2G spectrum scam.

But deep inside, party leaders felt a sense of helplessness at the rot that was setting in the Congress. Despite being in power for six-and-a-half years, the Congress as an organization was not growing. Whenever the party has been in power, the Congress has assumed the role of a philosopher, while the government is the politician; the former has influence and the latter, power. But the party’s economic, political and foreign affairs resolutions adopted at the 83rd plenary failed to reinforce this relationship.

Jawaharlal Nehru’s vision of the Congress had been of something more than just a party and was capable of drawing allegiance from millions. In 2011, the need for that vision has assumed greater significance.

With the exception of Pranab Mukherjee, most Congress ministers in the government lack the moral authority that the likes of Jagjivan Ram, Lal Bhahadur Shastri and others had in influencing the bureaucracy. These days, most Congress ministers rely heavily on bureaucrats, so much so that the Prime Minister’s office has to repeatedly discourage ministers from travelling with secretaries during their visits abroad.

The Congress has no in-house think-tank worth its name to either run orientation programmes or come up with brilliant ideas. As a result, while the UPA government is benefiting from several expert panels, regulatory authorities and advisers, the party seems to be in the grip of inertia, nepotism and corruption.

In November 2010, Sonia travelled to Allahabad to visit two mansions inextricably tied to the history of the Congress and the Nehru–Gandhis. The Congress president spoke of how Allahabad had always

shown the way during ‘moments of doubt and crisis’. Addressing a rally to mark 125 years of the party, Sonia said:

‘The Manmohan Singh government has been taking prompt, tough, difficult actions whenever any issue relating to corruption was raised,’ adding, ‘Fighting a tough battle against corruption is often lonely and fraught with risks when you run a government, but we are sure we will be able to follow this tough path till the end.’

Sonia’s thrust on removing corruption came when the combined Opposition practically paralysed the winter session of Parliament in November–December 2010 and targeted the prime minister. Sending a signal to the Congress, Sonia said: ‘Corruption is the biggest hurdle to development. We have zero tolerance for corruption. We have shown the way.’

The issue of corruption remains crucial for Sonia also because her long-term political strategy hinges on Manmohan Singh’s clean image and good governance. By 2014, the Congress, perhaps under a younger leadership, would need to hold up Singh’s tenure as an exemplar. A tainted UPA II, on the other hand, may force the party back to its 1996–2004 days, when it had to pay for the many scandals and failures of the P.V. Narasimha Rao government (1991–96).

Congress insiders say Sonia’s sensitivity to corruption has been heightened by the family’s difficulty in shaking off the ghost of Bofors that so heavily damaged the Rajiv Gandhi government’s credibility in the late 1980s. Politician Sonia is acutely conscious that public perception matters more than evidence on the touchy issue of corruption in high places.

chapter eight

The Philosopher and the Politician

As an ideology, the Congress followed the course of change with continuity. From Nehru to Sonia, the party leadership understood that dogma would not yield the party any long-term benefits in a multicultural, pluralistic society like India. The Congress, therefore, kept reinventing itself, avoiding confrontations and sharp divisions in society.

From its inception, the Congress functioned as an amorphous organization. The party constitution's articles 1 and 2 said the objective of the Indian National Congress was the well-being and advancement of the people of India and the establishment in India, by peaceful and constitutional means, of a socialist state based on parliamentary democracy in which there was equality of opportunity and of political, economic and social rights, and which aimed at world peace and fellowship. The second part of its core statement bore faith and allegiance to the Constitution of India and to the principles of socialism, secularism and democracy, which would uphold the sovereignty, unity and integrity of the nation.

Describing the Congress at the Avadi session, U.N. Dhebar, president of the AICC in 1955, had spoken extensively in the presence of Nehru, Indira and others, who nodded their heads in approval.

Speaking with a poet's flair Dhebar said: 'What is the Congress? It is a tear, fallen from the sufferings and agonized heart of humanity in bondage, coming to life. India has seen better days, but some of her weaknesses had become prey to the most subtle forms of exploitation – foreign and domestic. The more she tried to shake off the bondage, the faster, closer and tighter grew the bonds around her, till the agony of her heart and aches and pains of her body emaciated and famished for want of nourishment, both physical and cultural, could hardly bear them any longer. The tear was destined to become a stream, the stream a river and the river a mighty Ganga or a Brahmaputra, which was to wash off its sins and weaknesses of ages, to weld her people together, breathe new life and new spirit into their heart, and carry them afloat, united, purified and strengthened by their cherished goal. It was to be a force unparalleled in the history of the world. Its unarmed and unsophisticated armies were to spread the message and undertake a mission the world has heard and worked for only on rare

occasions.'

Bhogaraju Pattabhi Sitaramayya, who lost the Congress president's contest narrowly to Subhas Chandra Bose in 1939, equated the Congress ideology closely with the Indian nation. He told AICC delegates at the Jaipur plenary in 1948:

'The Congress is the service station of the life-giving ideology of the nation. The life-sustaining doctrines are pumped through the arteries of the government of the nation, where they become somewhat sullied in implementation and are returned to the Congress for purification. The ideology constantly discussed by the populace and constantly renovated as public opinion, is once again canalized by the Congress through the government in a renovated form, that is how the Congress and the government act and react upon each other… The Congress is really the philosopher, while the government is the politician. The latter has power and the former has influence.'

According to Nehru, the Congress was always something more than a party and capable of drawing allegiance from millions who were not formally with the party.

Speaking in New Delhi at the 1951 AICC session, Nehru had said: 'We have to retain something of that wider aspect of the Congress, but this should not lead to floppiness and loose thinking and an accommodation of all kinds of contrary opinions within its fold. In regard to principles – social, economic and political – this must be clear. There should be no room for reactionaries in the Congress fold. Nor should there be any room in it for those who seek, through its medium, personal advancement and profit at the cost of the public good. We have to pull ourselves up from the narrow grooves of thought and action, from factions, from mutual recrimination, from tolerance of evil in public life and in our social structure, and become again fighters for a cause and upholders of high principles.'

In subsequent party sessions and position papers, the Congress clarified and explained that its concept of socialism was not dogmatic or indoctrinaire.

In 1972, under Indira, the election manifesto prepared for the assembly polls read, 'Poverty must go. Disparity must diminish. Injustice must end.'

Earlier, at the Mumbai AICC session, Jagjivan Ram moved a resolution saying: 'Modern man is the inheritor of all that is noble and good in human thought. And thus our democratic socialism is a synthesis of all that is best in the thinking of the East and the West and provides an ideology superior to other sectarian ideologies which are communalistic or communitarian.'

In terms of the 'science of ideas' or ideology, the Congress's strength lies in the absence of ideological clarity.

Senior Congress leader Shriman Narayan Agarwal (who later dropped his caste surname, Agarwal) insisted that the Congress ideology not be interpreted as any rigid set of ideas whose acceptance was obligatory to all Congressmen. The culture of having a powerful, dominant leader and the tendency to change from time to time as per the political situation gave the Congress fresh, ideological frames. These were more matters of policy than faith. Such a compromise between various interest groups helped in the sharing of power and the doctrinal pluralism of its leaders.

By the time the Congress under Sonia met at Pachmarhi (1997), Shimla (2003) and Hyderabad (2006), the party had formally accepted the need for coalitions with parties of varying ideologies. The political resolution in Hyderabad said: 'At present, coalition of political forces and opinion is inevitable. Each political epoch needs a leader and a visionary who changes the traditional paradigm of society to face contemporary challenges.'

As the venue of most of the meetings of the CWC, 24 Akbar Road has seen the party making its key political, social, economic and international policy pronouncements. Considered to be the highest decision-making body of the party, the CWC has held different levels of power in the organization at different times. In the period prior to Independence in 1947, the CWC was the centre of power and often seen as more active than the Congress president. In the period after 1969, when the Congress party split for the first time between factions loyal to Indira Gandhi and those led by the syndicate of regional bosses, including K. Kamaraj and Morarji Desai, the power of the CWC declined.

Indira's triumph in 1971 marked the return of centralized power, making the CWC once again the paramount decision-making body of the party. In fact, the centralized nature of the CWC has prompted many party leaders, particularly those from the states, to describe its instructions as coming from the 'High Command'.

The Indira era saw the radicalization of Congress policies, programmes and leadership, followed by its fall. The relationship between the philosopher and the politician saw many highs and lows with the philosopher losing considerable ground during the regimes of Indira, Rajiv, Narasimha Rao and Kesri.

During the Nehru era, Nehru was the supreme decision maker, no matter what post he occupied. Socialist leaders such as Jayaprakash Narayan, Acharya Narendra Dev and Ram Manohar Lohia left the Congress in 1948.

Critics such as S. Gopal felt that even during the Nehru era, the real aim of the Congress was not so much to implement its declared

policies and see that the Constitution of India was carried forward in letter and spirit, than to live in power. For this objective, the Congress under Nehru, Indira, Rajiv and Sonia accommodated men of different hues even at the expense of the stated social and economic commitment to the country.

Indira inherited many of these powerful factions that continuously put pressure on her to make adjustments and accommodate them. She deftly dealt with the old guard represented by Desai, Chavan, Patil and Nijalingappa on the one hand, and the 'young Turks' or the 'verandah boys' (young socialist leaders such as Chandra Shekhar, Mohan Dharia, Krishna Kant, C. Subramaniam, Chandrajeet Yadav and others) on the other.

The young Turks inspired the entire new generation of that era when they successfully blocked the entry of Raja Kamakshya Narain Singh of Ramgarh in the Bihar cabinet through the offices of the then chief minister, Hari Har Singh, in violation of an earlier decision that feudal lords who were not part of the Congress should not be inducted in party-ruled states as ministers. C. Subramaniam, who was then Tamil Nadu Congress chief, resigned from the CWC. On 14 May 1969, the CWC asked Subramaniam to withdraw his resignation and the Bihar government to remove Raja Kamakshya from the Bihar ministry. Thus, Subramaniam won the day.

From 1967 to 1972, Indira displayed her extraordinary political acumen and sense of realpolitik. She kept pitting one Congress leader against the other to deal a body blow to the conservatives during the nationalization of banks, the abolition of the Privy Purse and the presidential polls that pitted Neelam Sanjiva Reddy against V.V. Giri. Chandra Shekhar and others took the high moral ground on the basis of her 'stray thoughts' at the stormy AICC meets in Bangalore, Mumbai and Faridabad. On 28 May 1970, Indira went public, chiding Chandra Shekhar at a mini AICC session in New Delhi for his 'armchair criticism'. Indira said the party (Congress) was free to change its leadership (Indira) if it felt that it could not deliver the goods. The subsequent developments saw the systemic exit of dissent from the Congress.

Gone were the days when Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy could tell party colleagues at the Bhavnagar session of the AICC (1961): 'I would, therefore, suggest for consideration that people who have been in power, say for a period of ten years, voluntarily relinquish their offices and take up organizational work. Their wisdom, backed by a decade of administrative experience, should be available for the Congress organization so that they can lead the organization into better channels.'

Instead, by 1972, Indira and her party were asking for a

‘committed bureaucracy’, rather than a neutral, professional workforce.

Airing Indira’s thoughts, Shankar Dayal Sharma told the Kolkata AICC session in 1972, ‘The training, the background and the mental make-up of the entire bureaucracy may have served the purpose of colonial rulers, but surely, it does not inspire confidence in India today.’

Gradually, the Congress developed a culture of the ‘supreme leader’, in which loyalty to an individual leader became critical for survival. The presence of Sanjay Gandhi as an extra-constitutional authority further squeezed inner party democracy and the right to dissent. Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne H. Rudolph, authors of *In Pursuit of Lakshmi: The Political Economy of the Indian State*, said that by the time Sanjay died in June 1980, the process of de-institutionalization of the party system was complete.

‘He (Sanjay) died as he lived: daring, impetuous, contemptuous of the rules, a danger to himself and others… the effect of Sanjay’s leadership on the Congress was to de-institutionalize it further by increasing its patrimonial features. By the time of his death, the party had become his and his mother’s bailiwick.’

Along with the cult of sycophancy, the pace of political corruption also quickened. The names of two Congress chief ministers, A.R. Antulay and Arjun Singh, were associated with ‘scandals’. These leaders earned legal reprieves and went on to become towering leaders in their respective way, but the incidents led to the rise of those who showed scant respect for parliamentary conventions or probity in public life.

Arjun Singh had risen from a small principality in the backward Rewa region of Madhya Pradesh. He cut his political teeth as an understudy of D.P. Mishra, who had earned the dubious distinction of being hailed as the Chanakya of Madhya Pradesh politics for giving Indira Gandhi a tough time. The Madhya Pradesh chief minister, whose son Brajesh Mishra was to later serve as principal secretary to Atal Bihari Vajpayee and as national security advisor, outwitted Indira at a time when Congress chief ministers used to be at the central leadership’s mercy. Mishra succeeded in defying Indira and consolidating support among the party’s MLAs, thus saving his position. But soon Arjun Singh outshone his mentor – so much so that tales of his manoeuvring replaced similar legends involving Mishra. A man of few words, Arjun Singh had a loyal band of party-men spread across the country. He was known to shower favours on his confidants, but expected unflinching loyalty in return. He was a strong votary of power politics and was credited with the view that power alone could overcome

many handicaps.

Arjun decided to aim for the pinnacle of Congress politics via 10 Janpath. He became a diehard Sonia loyalist in the hope that one day, 'Madam' would recognize his devotion, loyalty and worth. As a reward, she would play a role in making him the most powerful man in the country, perhaps even more so than the prime minister.

Subsequent events showed that Arjun sacrificed his promising political career, spurned rapprochement offers from Narasimha Rao, left the Congress, formed his own outfit, returned to the parent organization and successfully plotted the downfall of two coalitions headed by I.K. Gujral and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, respectively, in 1997 and 1998.

A great advocate of astrology, Arjun believed the many astrologers and godmen who had been telling him for long that he had *rajyog* (the fortune to rule) in his *kundli* (natal chart). 'Leave it to us and we will place all the stars in your favour,' a prominent godman from Madhya Pradesh had told him.

Arjun's associates said he took the *rajyog* theory too seriously. He used to tell his associates that he had been Congress vice-president, chief minister, governor and central minister, so the only thing that remained for him was to become the prime minister. He firmly believed that there was a 'divine design' behind his survival after the massive heart attack he suffered in 1989.

The doctors at Hamidia Hospital in Bhopal had almost given up on him when a call from Rajiv Gandhi ensured a timely airlift to Delhi's Escorts Heart Institute. His spiritual guru, Mauni Baba of Ujjain, took credit for the miracle. The guru, who had taken a vow of silence, reached Delhi and shut himself off to conduct various yagnas for his health. As Union communications Minister, Singh had given the guru two telephone connections. The act prompted a Hindi daily to run the headline, '*Jab Baba bolte nahin, to do telephone kyun* (Why give two telephones to the Baba when he does not speak)?'

The eventful life of Arjun Singh came to an end on 4 March 2011 coinciding with his exclusion from the Congress Working Committee as a regular member. While revamping the organization, Sonia had made a token gesture of retaining him as a permanent invitee to the party's highest decision-making body. But her goodwill gesture had little bearing on Arjun, who was already disillusioned and too ill to acknowledge it.

18 May 2004 proved a turning point for Arjun Singh when Sonia declined the post of prime minister, hours after the Congress-led coalition trounced Vajpayee's NDA. The Congress's secularism had won, the party had regained its past glory and a Gandhi was once again at the helm of affairs. Sadly for Arjun, it was not him but

another Singh who rose in the ranks. Arjun never reconciled himself to Manmohan Singh's stature but felt no bitterness towards him either.

In Madhya Pradesh, one of his many supporters was heard reciting an Urdu couplet of Mirza Ghalib to describe Arjun's eventful life, '*Hazaaron khwahishen aisi ke har khwahish pe dum nikle, bahut nikle mere armaan, lekin phir bhi kam nikle'* (Thousands of desires, each worth dying for, many of them I have realized yet I yearn for more).

Arjun's autobiography, *A Grain of Sand in the Ocean of Time* (Hay House), a book of about 500 pages that he was in the process of revising when he took ill on 29 January 2011, was published posthumously in July 2012. Many were intrigued by the secrets these pages were likely to contain. Congress leaders accord much importance to his account as, throughout his five-decade long political career, Arjun was considered a politician among politicians.

He was Congress vice-president under Rajiv Gandhi and during the height of the militant problem in Punjab. Arjun also served a spell as governor, bringing about the Rajiv– Longowal accord of 1985. He was chief minister of Madhya Pradesh during the Bhopal gas tragedy that killed over 15,000 people. Four days before the Babri demolition in December 1992, Arjun was in Lucknow, calling on the then BJP chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Kalyan Singh. Arjun – the unofficial No. 2 in the Narasimha Rao cabinet and the self-proclaimed champion of minorities – was supposed to proceed to Ayodhya and report back to Rao about the ground situation. Instead, Arjun made a hasty retreat to Delhi the same evening and met Rao, apparently to claim that everything was normal and under control.

In subsequent years, despite probing from the media and well-wishers, Arjun maintained a studied silence, saying he would reveal his intentions at an 'appropriate time' in his autobiography. Congress leaders also wonder endlessly about about why Arjun did not resign hours after the mosque was demolished. It is believed that many senior leaders, including party MPs and AICC functionaries, had urged Arjun to quit the ministry and take on the beleaguered Rao.

Arjun avoided giving any categorical reply. But according to IAS officer Sunil Kumar, who had gone to receive him at the airport on 6 December 1992, Arjun had said: 'You see, the easiest thing is to become a hero by resigning… and the toughest thing is to stick with him (Rao) and share the blame.' (Joshi, Ramsharan, *Arjun Singh: Ek Sahyatri Itihas ka*, Rajkamal Publication, New Delhi 2009)

Between 2004 and 2009, Arjun found himself increasingly marginalized in the UPA cabinet as well as in the Congress party even

though he was heading the human resource development ministry. He was dropped from an informal 'core committee' that used to meet every Friday and, by the time the UPA returned to power in May 2009, he found no place in the new cabinet.

His close associate Ramsaran Joshi had quoted Arjun's wife as saying that the veteran leader was 'deeply hurt' when Sonia did not consider him for the post of President in 2007. 'What harm would have taken place to Madam (Gandhi) if she had made him the President of India, the person who gave his all to the service of the family?' Saroj, his wife, had asked.

However, Arjun had told Joshi, '*Ab theek hai, jo ho gaya so ho gaya.* (Now it's all right. Whatever has happened, has happened).' (Joshi, Ramsharan, *Arjun Singh: Ek Sahyatri Itihas ka*, Rajkamal Publication, New Delhi, 2009.)

Weeks before he took ill, as he sat in his 17 Akbar Road residence, a marginalized Arjun would frequently glance at his empty appointments diary. If there were any visitors, they heard Arjun speak of 'coalition compulsions', 'the age factor' and 'change in political culture, values and ethos' to explain why he was no longer relevant in the Congress.

It remains to be seen if the man who knew so much about the Congress's palace intrigue would tell all or portray a 'loyalist' picture of momentous events in the country's contemporary history.

One of the aspects of the de-institutionalization taking place was the lack of inner party democracy. The annual AICC sessions and the democratic elections of office-bearers and the CWC became a thing of the past. In fact, after Nehru's death in 1964, while Kamaraj was the party chief, the trend of authoritarianism had already reared its head with elections of office-bearers and state party chiefs being postponed on one pretext or the other. After its 1969 split, the Congress began to depend more heavily on Indira, who used trusted lieutenants such as Jagjivan Ram, S.D. Sharma and D.K. Barooah as party chiefs.

Once the party shifted its office to 24 Akbar Road, inner party democracy was truly dead and gone. Rajiv Gandhi did try to effect some changes, but his preoccupation with Bofors and other controversies gave him no time to meet the goals he had spelt out at the Mumbai plenary. It was ironical that both Narasimha Rao and Sitaram Kesri, despite their leadership limitations, tried in their own ways to usher in an inner party democracy. Today's party leaders and in-house historians have little regard for those democrats. Sonia Gandhi did try to streamline the party's functioning, but she too functioned with ad hocism and expediency in spite of emerging as the supreme leader of the party. AICC sessions were not held regularly

and, for some inexplicable reasons, Sonia avoided constituting the party's all-powerful Central Parliamentary Board (CPB). As per the Congress constitution, the powers to grant tickets for the state assemblies, Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha lie with the CPB, but successive party presidents from Rao to Sonia, have usurped these powers without constituting the apex body.

Sonia's tenure has seen her, as party president, experimenting cautiously. Initially, she tried talent hunts, mixing loyalty with competence, but after the revolt of Sharad Pawar, P.A. Sangma and Tariq Anwar, she became disillusioned. She packed 24 Akbar Road with office-bearers, sometimes as many as a hundred and twenty-five, but on most occasions, AICC general secretaries and heads of frontal organizations and various departments avoided visiting the office regularly.

The AICC secretariat, lacking in modernization, continued in its reputation as a place for idle talk, media interaction and whiling away time. Both Sonia and Rahul, who was drafted as AICC general secretary in 2006, avoided visiting 24 Akbar Road regularly. Even CWC meetings have been known to be held more at Sonia's residence at 10 Janpath, instead of the party office.

Over time, Sonia began bypassing the CWC, which was in any case packed with 'loyalists'. This was in sharp contrast to her earlier style of functioning. After she took over as party chief in March 1998, there were dozens of meetings every year and the trend continued till 2000, when she got a better grip on all the party organs. Since then, CWC meetings have become few and far between.

Secularism has been an integral part of the Congress ideology, implying separation of religion from politics. In the Indian context, the Congress's definition of secularism meant equal respect for all faiths and protection of the security, identity and interests of all religious minorities. The concept of equal respect for all religions was first highlighted in the Nehru report of 1928 and by Gandhi at the Second Round Table Conference in London in 1931, where he showcased the Congress as India's most national and secular organization. Successive Congress resolutions continued to proclaim that the Congress would translate into reality the guarantees given in the Indian Constitution.

In September 1951, Nehru, using Mahatma Gandhi's tactics at Haripura, got all the CWC members of P.D. Tandon's team to resign, thus obliging Tandon himself to resign. Then, in the same month that the Jana Sangh was formally launched (with both Vajpayee and Advani present), Nehru, who had become the Congress president after Tandon's resignation, pronounced the bottomline of the party's secular creed at a meeting in the Ram Lila grounds on Gandhi Jayanthi in

1951:

'If any man raises his hand against another in the name of religion, I shall fight him till the last breath of my life, whether from within the government or outside.'

However, the demolition of the Babri Masjid and successive events cast a shadow on the Congress's commitment towards the minorities. While the Muslim leadership and religious clergy dubbed the Narasimha Rao-led Congress as furthering narrow 'majority-ism', a group within the Congress began calling for the need to review the concept of secularism.

V.N. Gadgil, who served as AICC spokesman during the regimes of Narasimha Rao and Kesri, told Congressmen at a seven-day training camp in Maharashtra that he disapproved of the Congress leadership's policy of appeasing Muslims.

At Kurla, which was a training camp to select 'future Congress leaders', Gadgil launched a scathing frontal attack on Congress policymakers. He observed:

'Every time the Shahi Imam makes a statement, the party reacts as if God himself has spoken. Do minorities mean only Muslims? What about Buddhists, Sikhs and others? When thirty-six Sikhs were killed in Kashmir recently, not a single Congressman condoled over their deaths. In Jammu and Kashmir, there is not a single Buddhist working in the state secretariat. The only Buddhist who was selected through the state public service commission had to convert to Islam to secure a government job… The Congress is silent on this.'

'While appeasing Muslims, we should not forget Hindus, who are a majority in this state,' Gadgil said, pointing at an article published in *The Economist*, which stated that 'Islam and democracy do not go together'. Quoting from the article, Gadgil said a province in China, which had a substantial Muslim population, wanted to break away and form a separate nation. (*The Asian Age*, 4 September 2000)

When Gadgil was asked why he was saying all this, he replied: 'I have said this earlier. Muslims constitute only 18 per cent of the vote share. Even if all of them vote for the Congress, the party will not return to power. We cannot go on ignoring the sentiments of the other 82 per cent.'

Asked if he was thinking of parting ways with the Congress, Gadgil replied in the negative, 'I was born a Congressman and will die one. My father was the first one who identified Nathuram Godse as Gandhiji's killer and avoided communal riots where thousands of Muslims would have been killed. I don't have to prove my secular credentials to anyone. I am only cautioning the Congress against treating only Muslims as a minority at the cost of Hindus. It has got to do with sheer electoral arithmetic.'

Sonia remained unfazed by Gadgil's outburst. She insisted that after the Babri Masjid demolition, the Congress was perceived as having compromised on its commitment to the secular ideal. Sonia then sought to equate that secular ideal with Hinduism, both as a philosophy and as a way of life. At the Ramakrishna Mission, on the occasion of Vivekananda's anniversary, she said India was secular primarily because Hinduism 'has been based on what our ancients said: Truth is one'. Taking a swipe at the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Sonia said, 'It is tragic that Vivekananda who admired, appreciated and swore by India's pluralistic and composite heritage has been over the years sought to be appropriated by certain sections of our society, who spread the politics of hate and antagonism, who reject the secular foundations of our ancient civilization, and who seek to distort the very message of Hinduism – that of tolerance, harmony and understanding of different faiths.'

Gadgil was pleased. He saw Nehru's belief in the human face of Hinduism reflecting in Sonia's observation that the catholicity and tolerance of the religion was the best guarantee of secularism in this country.

When the Opposition criticized Sonia's speech and said that its unstated, but important, objective was to counter the focus on Sonia Gandhi's Italian-Christian background, Pranab came to her rescue, arguing, 'Let's not forget that the first president of the Congress was a converted Christian, W.C. Bonnerjee. The second was Dadabhai Naoroji, a Parsi, the third, Badrauddin Tyabji, a Muslim, and the fourth, George Yule, a European.' No less than four Europeans and seven Muslims had served as INC presidents, he stressed.

During this period, the CWC met at 24 Akbar Road and adopted a resolution on 16 January 1999, articulating the Congress's definition of secularism. It said, 'The CWC endorses the views of the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, in her speech on the anniversary of Swami Vivekananda, where she had said, "India is secular primarily because of Hindus, both as a philosophy and as a way of life based on what our ancients said, *Ekam satyam, vipraha bahudha vadanti* (The truth is one, the wise pursue it variously)."'

The 16 January 1999 CWC resolution was significant in many ways. It acknowledged Hinduism as the most effective guarantor of secularism in India, adding that this 'basic truth' had been underlined on various occasions by both Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru.

The Congress focus on the primacy of Hinduism may have pleased Gadgil and a few others, but the ideological issue was far from settled. The February 2002 Gujarat outrage numbed the party leadership. Mass killings followed the Godhra carnage in which fifty-eight people,

mostly women and children, were burnt alive in a train coming from Ayodhya. A Gujarat bandh call was given, which triggered a more virulent bout of communal violence. No BJP leader in the central government gave any indication of the Narendra Modi government's firmness to intervene effectively to save minority lives. And when the issue came up on the floor of Parliament, the Union home minister, L.K. Advani, stoutly defended Modi. In the subsequent assembly polls of 2002 and 2009, the Modi-led BJP swept the polls in Gujarat.

The Congress reacted cautiously to Modi. Apart from condemning the events of communal violence, Sonia and Manmohan made the laws pertaining to communal violence more stringent. The political resolution adopted at the Hyderabad plenary session in 2006 observed, 'The Congress very frankly rejects and condemns the view espoused by some narrow-minded political parties that policy interventions to address the concerns for minorities, as perceived by them, amounts to minority appeasement. Such a view is devoid of any understanding of the founding principles of our constitution as indeed of the spirit in which the freedom movement brought together people of all faiths and communities.'

By March 2010, Sonia was back as chairperson of the National Advisory Council (NAC) to present the pro-poor tilt of the Congress. There were no big ideas emanating from 24 Akbar Road, which continued to host hangers-on. Unlike Indira and Rajiv, temperamentally, Sonia remained a bit sceptical about 'big government' doing everything. She believed that the role of voluntary organizations and NGOs was crucial in reaching out to villages in order to pass on the benefits of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, food security, Right to Information Act and loan waivers, among other things.

The UPA government's first phase, 2004–06, saw the Sonia-led NAC helping push through key legislation and social sector programmes, such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, the Right to Information Act, the tribal policy, the National Rural Health Mission and the National Rehabilitation Policy. The NAC also sent draft legislations on the Right to Education and for setting up Gram Nyayalayas.

Much of its weight was derived from the fact that its recommendations had Sonia's stamp of approval.

Though it was touted as a key political office, the NAC was largely comprised of non-political, civil society activists such as Jean Dreze and Aruna Roy, and other persons of eminence such as Prof. Mrinal Miri, Pratham's Madhav Chavan, and C.H. Hanumantha Rao. The party was nowhere in the picture. The reconstituted NAC or the NAC-II saw the exit of Congressman Jairam Ramesh. Sonia's new team was

a mix of activists, retired bureaucrats, economists, politicians and an industrialist with an unstinting passion for social change.

The NAC was first set up in 2004 as an interface between the people and the government for the implementation of the UPA's Common Minimum Programme. Through the NAC members, the government has access not only to their expertise and experience, but also to a larger network of research organizations, NGOs and social action and advocacy groups. The NAC has made detailed recommendations to the government in the areas of priority identified in the UPA's Common Minimum Programme. Some Opposition leaders and scholars felt the power and position of the NAC was not in keeping with the country's Constitution as it emerged as an alternative, unelected cabinet, which thrived on Sonia's political standing.

Sonia stoutly denied that she was behind the campaign to have actress Jaya Bachchan disqualified from the NAC: 'There is no question about it. My nature is not a vindictive one and is not a petty one, and besides, I have larger issues to concentrate on than the petty ones for which I am accused,' she told journalist Vir Sanghvi. (Interviewed by Vir Sanghvi in NDTV's series, *One on One* telecast on 28 October 2006)

Sadly enough, the entire mess of the office-of-profit controversy was created by Congressmen themselves and the only way out of the mess was for Sonia to resign as chief of NAC. The villain of the piece was said to be the then Union law minister, H.R. Bhardwaj, who mishandled the internal discussion among MPs over changes in the Members of Parliament (Prevention of Disqualification) Act, 1959. In parliamentary lexicon, an office of profit can be best described as a position that brings to the person holding it some financial gain, advantage or benefit. An office or place of profit necessarily carries some remuneration, financial advantage or benefit. The amount of such profit is immaterial. As per Article 102 (1) (A) of the Indian Constitution, an MP or MLA is barred from holding any office of profit with the government of India or in any state other than an office declared by the Parliament by law as not disqualifying its holder.

In May 2006, the UPA passed a bill in the Lok Sabha exempting forty-six posts, including the NAC chairmanship, from the purview of 'office of profit'. But a careful Sonia waited till the Supreme Court disposed of a petition challenging the law before resuming her post as NAC chief in early 2010.

To Sonia's credit, much more than letting Manmohan pursue his agenda of economic reforms and the Indo-US nuclear deal and her own preference for the 'social left', her success in reviving the Congress beginning 2004 was due to her 'back to basics' approach on

the issue of secularism, which helped the Congress consolidate its support base among the minority communities.

Sonia's vision for the Congress was to mix idealism with pragmatism. Her choice of Manmohan Singh as prime minister in May 2004 demonstrated that the AICC chief was opting for a man of integrity rather than a khadi-wearing loyalist. Manmohan Singh was drafted into the Congress in 1991, while Pranab Mukherjee and Arjun Singh had been in the party since the 1960s. According to an article in *Mint* by Vir Sanghvi, it is hard to conceive of any other member of the Nehru–Gandhi family giving away the kind of authority Sonia has to Manmohan Singh. The division of power between the Congress president and the prime minister has worked well enough from 2004 to 2013. Manmohan Singh has followed Sonia's broad agenda of liberal economics with an inclusive emphasis and she has backed the prime minister to the hilt to do the job as he sees best.

Most Congress leaders had missed Sonia's preference for Manmohan Singh from the time she took over as leader of the Congress in 1998. She appointed him leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, overlooking the claims of several senior leaders. At all party meetings, she turned to Manmohan Singh and sought his views. Manmohan Singh was always at her side when she called on visiting foreign dignitaries and delegations.

By early 2001, Madhavrao Scindia, who was fancying himself as the next 'prime ministerial candidate' in the event of Sonia stepping down, became restless over the rise of the blue-turbaned Sikh. Privately, Scindia, who was deputy leader of the Congress in the Lok Sabha, began sounding bitter about Manmohan Singh and his proximity to Sonia. Scindia died in an air crash in September 2001, ending a possible saga of challenging Manmohan Singh within the Congress.

In 2002, when there was a deadlock in the government-formation process in Kashmir, where a split verdict saw the Congress forming the government with the regional Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) led by Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, Sonia's choice of Manmohan Singh as her point man was not without significance. Even then, Manmohan Singh had tremendous standing in the US and Europe, where a close watch was being kept on developments in the Kashmir Valley. The signal to the Western powers was that Sonia meant business in Jammu and Kashmir, which was why she had fielded her best lieutenant, who was not a conventional politician, there.

Away from public scrutiny, Sonia found Manmohan Singh's economic thinking to be on the same page as hers. She did not believe in a state-controlled economy. Her lengthy discussions with

Manmohan Singh prior to 2004 had convinced her that a market-controlled economy, if properly guided, could benefit many including those who were at the margins of society. Her understanding of the new world order and need for reforms contributed significantly to convincing the great Indian middle class and captains of industry that under Manmohan Singh, reforms would continue and there would be further liberalization. Manmohan Singh, too, made it clear that his government was not sensex-driven, but functioned in a transparent, pro-industry, pro-entrepreneur manner. In a nutshell, Sonia managed to communicate to the masses, even those who did not read newspapers or watch television, that the Congress's prime responsibility towards the poor did not stand compromised by Manmohan Singh's economic reforms.

Coming back to the philosopher-politician relationship, the Sonia–Manmohan Singh regime saw the mass induction of professionals as politicians or as functional heads of crucial sectors; the list included Kapil Sibal, Jairam Ramesh, Sam Pitroda, Montek Singh Ahluwalia, C. Rangarajan, Shashi Tharoor and dozens of others who were handpicked and who began calling the shots. Some were in the cabinet, others in the Planning Commission, NAC, Finance Commission, Prime Minister's Scientific Advisory Council or Knowledge Commission, and still others enrolled as interlocutors for behind-the-scenes talks with the US, Pakistan and China.

Thus, on the face of it, traditional politicians appeared to be in charge of the big cabinet portfolios, but in reality, their influence was on the wane. Their places were being discreetly taken over by highly skilled professionals who shared Manmohan Singh's vision. The beauty of the system was that unlike Rajiv's time when he made a sincere bid to bring professionalism into the party and the government, but had faced many detractors in the process, this time round, virtually no one complained.

On another plane, Rahul Gandhi took it upon himself to bring about inner party democracy in the Congress. He hired a retired election commissioner, J.M. Lyngdoh, to design processes and implement policies to ensure that there were free internal elections within the party and that all initiatives and representatives were backed by elected representatives. Like Rajiv's Mumbai speech of 1985, Rahul was aiming at a paradigm shift in the country's politics, which were steeped in caste equations and corruption.

The Lyngdoh-led Foundation for Advanced Management of Elections (FAME), had many leading lights, mostly those involved in conducting polls in India such as T.S. Krishna Murthy, N. Gopalaswami, K.J. Rao, S.K. Mendiratta and other former bureaucrats

known for their integrity and probity in public life.

FAME was initially approached by Telugu megastar Chiranjeevi – born Shiva Shankara Vara Prasad Konidela – who in 2008 had floated the Praja Rajyam Party to participate in the 2009 Andhra assembly polls. Lyndgoh and FAME office-bearers had several rounds of meeting with Chiranjeevi but soon they realized that the actor-turned-politician had little patience to set up a structured outfit. When FAME asked him about Praja Rajyam membership, Chiranjeevi boasted of four million but could not show the list of members carrying their names or addresses. FAME quietly withdrew. Chiranjeevi, who had mobilized an unprecedented crowd of over a million at Tirupati at the launch of Praja Rajyam, received a sound drubbing in the 2009 assembly and general elections. Praja Rajyam could not make a major win. Chiranjeevi himself contested from two different constituencies and lost in Palakollu. Praja Rajyam got 18 MLA seats. In February 2011, Chiranjeevi's Praja Rajyam merged with the Congress.

Days after FAME parted ways with Chiranjeevi, Rahul Gandhi got in touch with Lyngdoh requesting him to streamline organizational polls in the Indian Youth Congress and the National Students' Union of India (NSUI), the two organizations under his charge as AICC general secretary.

Before saying 'yes' to him, FAME office-bearers sought three concessions from Rahul before signing a memorandum of understanding or a contract with the Congress: No criminal should be allowed to contest party elections. Polls should be transparent. All disputes would be settled by FAME and not by the party. Rahul readily agreed.

FAME general secretary and former central election commission secretary K.J. Rao who closely interacted with Rahul while conducting party polls for the Youth Congress and NSUI in Punjab, Delhi, Uttrakhand and other states, claims that the young Gandhi gave them a free hand. 'Rahul is not all sweetness – he can be tough too,' Rao recalled, adding that during a NSUI election poll in Delhi, re-polling had to be undertaken in 10 colleges and 12 candidates were debarred. 'I sent him a message at 2.30 p.m. and he got back in two hours. Ineligible candidates withdrew with an apology to FAME,' Rao said. As central election commission secretary, Rao had earned the nickname 'Cobra Dancer' for his daring in handling of criminals in Bihar and elsewhere in the country.

While enforcing inner party democracy in the NSUI and Youth Congress, FAME had to struggle hard. While conducting Youth Congress polls in Chhattisgarh, a tussle of sorts broke out between the Congress central leadership and Amit Jogi, the son of the former chief minister of Chhattisgarh, Ajit Jogi. The younger Jogi had filed his

nomination for the post of state Youth Congress president. But soon, he was brought under pressure to withdraw his nomination for his involvement in a criminal case. Amit reportedly received a call from Jitendra Singh, the AICC secretary attached to Rahul, saying that Rahul wanted his nomination withdrawn. Apparently, under advice from FAME, Rahul was not too pleased with Amit's failure to maintain a squeaky-clean image. So, despite adding four lakh new members to the Youth Congress, Amit did not quite make the cut in Rahul's eyes.

In Punjab, too, the idea of enforcing inner party democracy faced stiff resistance. When FAME despatched eight of its officials to various districts of the state to independently verify the ground situation in the Youth Congress, senior leaders of the parent organization showed utter disdain towards 'outsiders'. There was constant pressure for inclusion of someone's favourite, a relative of a camp follower. Invariably, FAME passed on the information to Rahul Gandhi's personal staff and did not hear from the regional satraps again. Rao says Punjab youth Congress polls made him believe that restoring inner party democracy was possible in spite of many constraints. 'On a visit to Amritsar, I was approached by a district youth Congress chief. He kept saying he was elected district chief. I asked why was he saying again and again that he was elected, the young boy replied, "Sir *iska wazan zyada hai* (It carries more weight)."'

However, teething problems continued to dog the inner party democracy drive. Ironically, the Congress, being the parent organization, posed maximum problems. Apart from pressure and the kith-and-kin factor, the 'nomination culture' in the main party posed a hindrance. For decades, the Congress had made a custom of 'authorizing the leadership' (i.e., AICC chief) to appoint even district-level party heads. Moreover, there was little tolerance towards those challenging the leader or forcing the contest.

In the 1999–2000 AICC polls, Jitendra Prasada had taken on Sonia and lost handsomely. Prasada, who was himself a deft player and a politician among politicians, found himself completely marginalized. The trauma of defeat, coupled with his sudden isolation in the party was so intense that Prasada suffered a haemorrhage and died at the age of 64. For the next ten years, Prasada's fate discouraged all potential challengers to the leadership. Privately, many Congress leaders admired Democrat President Barack Obama for giving the influential secretary of state post to Hillary Clinton, who had fought bitter primary party polls against him. In Congress history, most challengers who took on the leadership were invariably forced out. In the Mahatma Gandhi era, Subhas Chandra Bose had to quit inspite of winning Congress presidential polls against Pattabhi Sitaramayya in 1939. Bose resigned from the post due to ideological differences with

Gandhi.

In 1950, Purushottam Das Tandon won against Acharya Kriplani ahead of the Nasik AICC session. As the relations between the party and the government suffered during that period, it became a sort of unwritten norm for the leader of the government to also be the party president or at the least, have a pliable candidate in the post. In 1969, Indira split the Congress party (which later became the official Congress) after developing irreconcilable differences with then Congress President Nijalingappa.

Apart from such a 'legacy', successive Congress regimes did nothing to set up an apparatus for party polls. Till date, the office of the Congress Central Election Authority (CEA) which was empowered with the responsibility for conducting regular party elections, functions from a small room tucked away in 24 Akbar Road.

The CEA has skeletal regular staff and functions largely with the help of Congress leaders appointed by the party chief. The CEA members, Pradesh (state) returning officers, observers, etc., continue to be full-timers and in most cases, aspirants for ministerial berths, assembly, Lok Sabha or Rajya Sabha tickets, or gubernatorial assignments.

In other words, these 'volunteers' were open to pressure and allurements in most cases. All PROs, observers and others engaged in the 'poll process' were supposed to bear all their boarding and lodging and travel expenses as the CEA did not have funds to meet their actual expenses. Even in state units, the CEA lacked 'independence'. For instance, when Prasada was travelling to state capitals to muster support against Sonia, he found most PCC offices shut or black flags greeting him.

FAME's Rao believed Rahul would need a lot of courage to set the house in order. 'From our experience, we felt the need for an independent, professional agency to conduct party polls. To start with, there is not an authentic voters' list. There is a need for professionals to conduct polls,' he said, suggesting a pool of 'retired' politicians from within the Congress. Unfortunately for Rahul and Rao, there is no existing category of 'retired Congressmen' so far.

Ahead of the Bihar assembly polls in October 2010, FAME asked Rahul to pick presidents for each assembly and Parliament segment, one mandatory general secretary from the reserved category for every assembly seat and the functionaries' tenure being fixed at two years.

Initially, Rahul's push for inner party democracy and transparency was not quite picture-perfect. For one, it appeared to be shrinking the Congress's base. In the membership drive that was conducted as part of the run-up to the party's organizational polls, Rahul's insistence that all members should attach their photographs to the membership

form posed a problem. Many state party leaders said ‘genuine’ party members, such as farm-workers, day-labourers and burqa-clad Muslim women, lacked the time and inclination to get themselves photographed. Party insiders, though, told a different story.

They said the insistence on photographs had eliminated the possibility of showing ‘bogus’ members. The Congress membership form of 2010 asked for each member’s photo, thumb impression, residential address and two referees. So, the past practice of just copying names and addresses from electoral rolls was no longer possible. This disconcerted the power-brokers tremendously.

Rahul, however, stayed on course, keen on reforming the party from within. He insisted on elections at all levels in the Youth Congress and the National Students’ Union of India. He successfully organized these polls in states such as Punjab, Uttarakhand, Delhi and Tamil Nadu.

Over a period of time, Rahul managed to find a ‘pool of talent’ in Lok Sabha MPs like Meenakshi Natrajan, Ashok Tanwar, Jitendra Singh and a dozen others who were handpicked by the young Gandhi. They were a young, committed and talented lot who shared Rahul’s world view and formed his core team. In 24 Akbar Road, the talent hunt was a warning bell to the traditional lot. Rahul’s arrival signalled the survival of those who had much more than just loyalty to give to the party. In Rahul’s scheme of things, it mattered to be a professional (from various walks of life) or a winner in the electoral fray (both party polls and general elections). Mere sycophancy, family lineage or loyalty was not sufficient.

Rahul’s talent hunt created ripples both inside and outside the Congress. Instead of 24 Akbar Road, he preferred to function from his 12 Tughlaq Crescent residence. Interviewing the forty-odd aspirants for the post of Youth Congress chief, he asked them how India’s international trade had developed in the last three decades. His next query was how the country would benefit from the Indo–US civil nuclear deal.

Mathew Kuzhalanadan, a Youth Congress leader who was enrolled as a PhD student in international trade law at Jawaharlal Nehru University in 2007, said he was amazed by the range of questions that were asked – international trade, the bombings across India, and poverty. Nobody had quite expected this line of interviewing. ‘Many aspirants, including me, anticipated questions only on the Congress party’s ideology and on its manifesto during the interaction. We were taken aback, but it was an inspiring occasion that helped us understand Rahul’s world view and how he thinks,’ Mathew remarked later.

This talent hunt was in sharp contrast to what the Youth Congress had stood for during 1975–76, when Sanjay Gandhi's associates were compared with 'Hitler's stormtroopers' or Mao's 'Red Guards'. The youth wing continued to be perceived as a body full of 'undesirable elements' during the leadership of Rajiv, Narasimha Rao and Kesri, and for some part of the Sonia era, too.

Rahul tried to change this stereotyped, 'undesirable' image. With the help of Sachin Pilot, Deepender Singh Hooda and Ashok Tanwar, he sought to identify possible contenders from across the country. Rahul said his long-term goal was to build a strong youth organization as more than 50 per cent of the country's population was less than twenty-five years of age.

The Indian Youth Congress had remained merely a department of the parent organization till 1969, when Indira Gandhi picked Narain Dutt Tiwari as its first national president. Tiwari, a political science topper and the student union president of Allahabad University in 1947, was thirty-nine – over age by Youth Congress standards. His tenure remained mostly forgettable, except for one occasion when he went with Sharad Pawar and Arjun Singh to greet the visiting Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser on behalf of the Youth Congress. As the dignitaries disembarked from the plane, Tiwari took the lead to greet Nasser, whom he assumed was the tallest and physically best-built member of the group – who turned out to the president's security guard!

At the Indore AICC session in 1971, Indira directed the youth organization to take on the right-wing parties. Priya Ranjan Dasmunsi became the first, and until Rahul introduced election culture in 2009–10, the only elected president of the Youth Congress.

The organization peaked from 1976 to 1981 when Sanjay Gandhi was calling the shots. The student leaders stormed the nation with programmes ranging from slum demolitions and family planning to tree-planting schemes and anti-dowry campaigns. Kamal Nath, who was inducted by Sanjay, recalled in an interview, 'We were the Youth Congress. We had a very deliberate, focused programme. It was the five-point programme of the Youth Congress, which is now an international programme. Each one plant one; each one teach one. Noida was created by Sanjay Gandhi. I used to drive there with Sanjay Gandhi when there was not a tree there.'

This firebrand group was the backbone of Indira's Congress in the 1970s. In fact, many youngsters of the Sanjay era, such as Kamal Nath, Ambika Soni, Vayalar Ravi, A.K. Antony, Ghulam Nabi Azad, Mukul Wasnik and B.K. Hariprasad, held important posts in the party and the government.

According to Indira Gandhi, Sanjay was not interested in politics.

In an interview to author Dom Moraes when Sanjay was alive, she claimed that her son disapproved of politics. 'But when I was in difficulties at Allahabad, he was one of the few people who stood by me to help the party and the country. If someone who has shown he is loyal says that he wants to do something to help, can you turn him away?' Indira said she had asked the then Congress president, D.K. Barooah, in July 1975 what Sanjay could do. Barooah quickly suggested that Sanjay run the Youth Congress. Sanjay said he would do it and entered 10 Janpath, which was the Youth Congress office then, as a member of its national council.

India Today's senior editor Priya Sahgal who was Rahul's contemporary in St. Stephen's College observed that by 2000, the Youth Congress leaders were known for their penchant for fast cars, foreign junkets and corruption scandals. During Randip Surjewala's tenure as head of the Youth Congress, the organization's activities were moved from 5 Rajendra Prasad Road to an office near Jantar Mantar, in the vicinity of which the bulk of public demonstrations in the Indian capital were held. Ashok Tanwar's reign saw the venue shifting to auditoriums, where workshops and seminars were held. Street fights and social work played a token role in the agenda.

Instead of producing young leadership on a factory assembly line, the Youth Congress produced a band of young MPs, each of whom was also a young dynast. This, in real terms, discouraged grass-roots workers, who were made to realize that leaders were parachuted from the top. Rahul himself candidly admitted that the Gandhi 'tag' helped him emerge at the top, but he promised to change and dispel this feeling of neglect. (Sahgal, Priya, 'National Youth Politics – Clipped Wings', *India Today,* 25 February 2008.)

There are other affiliated organizations that function from 24 Akbar Road, which do not really fulfil their designated role. The All India Mahila Congress, for instance, is considered a downmarket kitty party. In 1988, when Rajiv was Congress president and prime minister, he called the then president of the Mahila Congress, Jayanti Patnaik, and told her, 'For God's sake, do something and change the Mahila Congress from the kitty club that it has become.' Twenty-two years later, 'kitty club' still remains an apt description of the organization that was fashioned to empower 50 per cent of the country's population.

The story of the Seva Dal is no different. Set up in 1923, the Seva Dal was originally meant to look after the families of freedom fighters who had been sent to prison. Later, Jawaharlal Nehru fashioned it to counter the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, as a uniformed arm of the Congress that would help in disaster relief and instil the party

ideology amongst its cadre.

Prahlad Yadav, who has served as national Seva Dal chief, recalled how, in 1983, when Rajiv was general secretary in charge of frontal organizations, he got every MP below fifty to wear shorts and undergo physical training at Seva Dal camps. Prahlad said if party leaders were asked to wear Seva Dal caps today, somebody would ask them to fetch a glass of water. In 2005, at an AICC meet at the Talkatora Stadium in Delhi, the Seva Dal made Rahul wear the Gandhi topi. Within minutes, the rest of the CWC was seen in Seva Dal caps and no one asked Rahul to fetch a glass of water. The incident once again underlined the fact that unless Rahul stood up and devoted himself to the cause of these affiliated units, their condition would not be drastically altered.

There are far too many issues begging for Rahul's attention. On the hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of the Congress, columnist Sheela Bhatt drew the young general secretary's attention to a range of issues. Sheela asked Rahul to ponder why from the Nehru era till 2010, the members of the Nehru–Gandhi family had been visiting the poor to 'discover India'. On a broader plane, she told him that in spite of the Constituent Assembly, which framed the country's Constitution according to the party's vision, and had 82 per cent members nominated from the Congress, successive Congress prime ministers had moved numerous constitutional amendments.

'It is not difficult to explain why the Congress is going strong in the electoral battlefield and the Congress government (2004–10) is enjoying power without any real opposition even as the national institutions are getting weaker and weaker. This is so because the Congress doesn't have the moral fibre to throw out of the system weak and corrupt leaders when they flout rules,' said Bhatt.

Like his father, Rahul may have been a reluctant recruit to the country's political scene, but his career plans have been chalked out for him. The newest Gandhi on the block has little choice but to complete what he's started.

chapter nine

The Rivals

Tucked away in a corner next to the canteen, a cramped room at 24 Akbar Road functions around the clock without ever being shut. A retired infantry major, his secretary, a non-commissioned officer and three others monitor the computers there, sending and receiving fax messages and answering telephones, ignoring the various tantalizing smells emerging from Sagar Canteen next door – those of sambhar, chhola bhaturas and samosas. The cooks at the canteen seem to have a penchant for the potato – it finds its way into the masala dosas, the samosas and even the chhole that accompany the fat bhaturas. But such gastronomic concerns seldom distract the men in the AICC's 'control room'.

It was Rajiv Gandhi who first came up with the idea of a round-the-clock control room at 24 Akbar Road. Out of power in 1989, Rajiv was at a reception at the Indian Air Force chief's residence just opposite the party office when he was introduced to Major Dalbir Singh, a young Sikh who had just left the army to assist his father in a successful construction business.

A retired air vice-marshal, who was part of the AICC's ex-servicemen's cell, and Rajesh Pilot wondered aloud if 'young men' like Dalbir could assist Rajiv in his mission to rope in professionals to run the party. Dalbir said he was immediately interested and told Rajiv he should form a team of former air force, army and naval officers sympathetic to the Congress to handle the 'logistics' of the mission. Rajiv asked him to think about it and get back to him.

Dalbir could barely sleep that night. Next morning, he sought an appointment with Rajiv and, since then, he has been a regular fixture at 24 Akbar Road.

Setting up a professional team was not easy. Dalbir, Major Sudhir Sawant, S.S. Ahluwalia (who later joined the BJP) and their colleagues faced stiff and often violent resistance from Congress party bigwigs such as H.K.L. Bhagat. There was a contractor, called Bhatia, who had a flair for magnifying his bills with the connivance of politicians. When some of his payments were stopped on grounds of duplicity and overcharging, Bhatia had a group of thugs pay a visit to Dalbir's West Delhi house. The musclemen asked the infantryman to mend fences with Bhatia or bear the consequences. The major said he would give

them Bhatia's dues. Within a minute, he was back, but without any money. The sight of the M1 carbine in his hand had such an instant impact that the goons' pace of retreat could have earned them an award in a 100 m race!

The non-Congress world has never properly understood the significance of the AICC's 'control room'. Under Rajiv's guidance, it developed a huge network with appropriate infrastructure. The team gathered both vertical and lateral flows of information backed by data. It helped the leadership take decisions and react with alacrity. For instance, when the party was out of power during 1989–91 and between 1996 and 2003, the control room served as an important source of information for the leadership on significant happenings the world over, ranging from the death of leaders to major policy decisions made by world leaders.

Former Congress chief Sitaram Kesri died on the night of 24 October 2000. Sonia Gandhi was the first to reach the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, much before any television channel beamed the news of Kesri's death. His body had to be flown to Patna to be cremated in his hometown, Danapur. The control room worked all through the night to ensure that Kesri's body was first placed at 24 Akbar Road, where CWC members, chief ministers of Congress-ruled states, the then Lok Sabha speaker G.M.C. Balayogi, and BJP chief Bangaru Laxman laid wreaths on it.

The control room has been synonymous with efficiency and quick responses. In 2001, Gujarat's Bhuj region was badly hit by an earthquake and Sonia decided to go there. A special plane took off, but midway, Captain Vijay Trehan, a former chairman of Vayudoot and trusted Rajiv loyalist, realized that the Bhuj airstrip belonged to the Indian Air Force. As per the norms, permission to land on the airstrip had to be obtained at least twenty-four hours in advance. The aircraft was asked to halt at Ahmedabad. A frantic Vincent George called up Dalbir, seeking help. For the next twenty minutes, Dalbir explored his entire ex-servicemen network and even tapped those working with George Fernandes, the then defence minister, who was known for his hostility to Sonia and the Gandhis. The Air Force authorities made an exception and permitted Sonia's plane to land. There were numerous such instances of the control room stepping in to get work done.

The control room also establishes and maintains an effective communication network between 24 Akbar Road and all the Congress state and district party offices. It regularly sends out tour programmes of visiting AICC functionaries, and records, sorts out and dispatches all communication pertaining to the party. The team picks and chooses

anything that needs the Congress president's attention. In many communications, confidentiality is paramount. A few years ago, a Congress leader from a Northeastern state sent a fax spelling out the exact 'rate' for each floating MLA required to form the government. The fax also contained some information on the conduct of the state governor, who was supposed to be apolitical and in charge of a constitutional office.

Prior to parliamentary and state assembly polls, the control room acts as a base for all party observers, who are sent out six months in advance. The tour programmes of these hundreds of leaders need to be formulated and coordinated, and each report has to be submitted before the Central Election Committee. In addition, the control room prepares a list of all party campaigners and talking points. It monitors the political situation prevailing in the various states, and stocks and dispatches publicity material, among other things. Surprisingly, even senior and seasoned political leaders often opt for 'talking points' before appearing on a television debate or discussion.

The war room has other tasks, too. It is supposed to render all assistance to the AICC's relief committee. In other words, each time some part of the country is affected by flood, famine, earthquake or any major disaster, the war room team is supposed to collect funds, buy essential commodities and ensure that they reach the destination quickly and safely. The task becomes more important when the party is in power at the centre. During the Orissa cyclone of October 1999, thousands of people were killed and some twenty million marooned as power and communication links were severed for days. For several days, New Delhi's policy on foreign assistance remained ambiguous, allowing the aid, but not admitting that it was coming. In fact, there is still no firm policy on foreign assistance at the time of disasters. There is a certain diffidence about it, which is not easy to understand.

Orissa was then ruled by the Congress and the Union government was headed by the BJP's Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Orissa has always been a neglected, poor state. Even after fifty years of Independence, more than 70 per cent of the state's people live below the poverty line. Even though Orissa is full of natural resources such as chromite, iron, coal and aluminium, it has very few industries. It is among the few states where railway lines are not electrified.

Sonia was deeply moved by the enormity of the damage in Orissa. She quickly constituted a team under senior party leader Jitendra Prasada, and called the AICC Relief Committee. At the time, Prasada was contesting the election for party chief against her. Choosing him for the job was indicative of Sonia's democratic credentials. Within two days, 24 Akbar Road saw the arrival of dozens of truckloads of wheat, rice, daal, jaggery, sugar and utensils. Prasada asked Sonia to

flag off these trucks to Bhubaneswar, but he himself did not turn up. Dalbir's team took the entire convoy of trucks to Prasada's Teen Murti residence in the presence of TV crews and photographers. But the next day, neither the electronic nor the print media gave any publicity to Sonia or Prasada.

The cramped and overworked control room was also supposed to assist the AICC's political training department in organizing and coordinating all national and regional-level camps. Since Mahatma Gandhi's times, the Congress leadership made numerous attempts to reform politics and give its content more depth. In the pre-Independence era, the concept of Swaraj did not merely mean the transfer of power from the British to the Indians, but a moral and material regeneration of the people. As part of putting emphasis on 'constructive work', in 1907 in Kolkata, the Congress had prescribed hand-spinning and weaving of khadi as a 'measure of discipline and sacrifice for every man, woman and child'. By 1922, it had distributed twenty lakh charkhas among its ten million members.

Spinning khadi was not the only item of economic regeneration in the languishing villages of India. There still remained all the arts and crafts that make up the life of rural people. In 1934, the Congress set up the All-India Village Industries Association at Wardha, which was a self-acting, independent and non-political organization. Its objective was village re-organization and reconstruction, including the revival of village industries and the moral and physical development of the villagers of India.

In order to deal with the problem of lack of education, in 1938 the Congress came up with a new system of education, Basic National Education, under the aegis of the Hindustani Talimi Sangh (the All India Education Board). Eradication of untouchability was another public cause taken up by the Congress in the pre-independence era. After the Poona Pact, Gandhiji devoted most of his time to this work and a separate organization and fund, with widespread branches, were organized to look after Harijan work.

These programmes were mandatory for Congressmen at the time. During his lifetime, Gandhi made it obligatory for all party-men to do one or the other of the 'constructive work' including augmenting communal unity, prohibition, village sanitation, adult education, and health and hygiene.

After Independence, with the passage of time, Congressmen, somewhat intoxicated by the fruits of power, began to neglect 'the thrust on constructive work'. Spinning khadi was no longer required because the Indian textile industry was flourishing. Untouchability was receding and had become illegal. Congressmen under Nehru, Shastri and Indira felt that education, sanitation, and health and

hygiene had become priority areas for the government of the day.

But over time, fewer MPs and party leaders attended leadership workshops and courses. The party lacked qualified trainers and the content of the camps organized by the Seva Dal was so obsolete that many avoided them.

Congress leader Mani Shankar Aiyar, who was first tasked by Sonia to look at the organizational failures of the Congress in 1999, and later in his role as the convenor of Panchayati Raj-related programmes and leadership courses, conducted an in-depth study of what ailed the Congress. According to Aiyar, in the 1999 Lok Sabha elections, the Congress lost more than a hundred seats by a reversible percentage of the vote, implying that a mere 3-4 per cent change in the poll, and all other factors remaining equal, the Congress could have doubled its performance had it changed its sitting candidates.

Aiyar, who was part of the Antony Committee, which went into the reasons for the Congress's poor performance, recommended that Congress candidates be selected at least three to six months before the due date of the elections in order to give them time to prepare for the polls, instead of hanging around 24 Akbar Road till the last moment before nominations closed, as has regrettably been the practice. The recommendation was accepted by the CWC, but it has not been implemented till date. There are practical problems; there is also an adamant mindset anchored in past practice, privilege and patronage that is proving difficult to break.

While little changed at 24 Akbar Road, successive party leaders began looking outside the party office to bring in an element of professionalism and urgency, particularly during or closer to the general elections. While Sanjay and Indira preferred to function from their residence, Rajiv opted for 2A Motilal Nehru Marg. Narasimha Rao functioned from the prime minister's residence, while Kesri did not have the opportunity to lead any electoral campaign from the front.

The 2004 general elections saw the emergence of 99 South Avenue and 80 Lodhi Estate as the Congress's 'war rooms'. Initially, 99 South Avenue was allotted to the Congress Rajya Sabha MP R.P. Goenka, who, in turn, handed the flat over to Sonia for the party's use. Sonia used it to set up the party's high-profile department of planning, policy, information and coordination. Each day, a team consisting of Jairam Ramesh, Salman Khurshid, Janardan Dwivedi and others would meet at 99 South Avenue, a small flat that used to serve earlier as the venue for the meetings of the Congress's thinktank.

At 99 South Avenue, traditional modes of managing elections were scrapped in favour of a more corporate style. Professional advertising and marketing agencies such as Leo Burnett and Perfect Relations were hired. The Congress managers realized that there was no way they could match the high-decibel BJP campaign, given the party's paltry twenty-crore-rupee budget. The Congress, instead of going with a mega campaign, focused on a regional strategy with the motto, 'Think global, act local'. According to Jairam Ramesh, in a span of three months, from March to May 2004, three thousand insertions appeared in the print media. Of these, 80 per cent were in the regional media.

Under Sonia, the Congress turned the tables on its opponents with a simple strategy. Alliances gave them arithmetic, while campaigns got them chemistry. Ad agency Leo Burnett focused on the theme of the '*aam aadmi*' (common man) to do all the talking. The Congress campaign, closely supervised personally by Sonia, targeted its audience with issues such as farmers' suicides, the Gujarat riots, Coffingate, the UTI scam and growing unemployment. Leo Burnett CEO Arvind Sharma and executive director Jayshree Sunder conducted both quantitative and qualitative research studies that showed that prior to May 2004, the common man had been feeling left out. The general feeling of the respondents from all over India was that their life had not changed in the five years of BJP rule.

According to ad guru Suhel Seth, Sonia understood the spirit of consumers. That was why the masses bought 'Brand Sonia'. Brand Sonia created a syndrome where there was under-promise and over-delivery. In one fell swoop, she became a brand of the masses. During her campaign, she asked the masses to introspect and ask themselves whether they were feeling good or if their India was really shining. And it is this connection that she pursued with vigour.

Sonia saw great merit in holding road shows all over the country. By the time she reached Vijayawada in Andhra Pradesh, she was convinced that the country was craving change.

Sonia's speech-writers worked well too, carefully focusing on the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government's failures, particularly its inability to accelerate rural development and poverty alleviation programmes. For days, the Congress thinktank searched for a catchy slogan to counter the BJP's 'India Shining' campaign, finally settling for 'Congress *ka haath, Garib ke saath* (The Congress "hand" – its party symbol – is with the poor)'. Once again, Rahul intervened. He, along with Jairam and Dwivedi, argued with the rest of the CWC to replace '*garib*' (poor) with '*aam aadmi*' (common man).

The month-long election campaign ended on 10 May 2004, but for

Sonia and her close advisors, it was the beginning of another gruelling round of discussions and stocktaking. Channel-surfing became more intense and analyzing newspaper reports became a major obsession at 10 Janpath and 99 South Avenue. The South Avenue flat was the Congress nerve-centre, where, at times, Ambika Soni, Jairam Ramesh, Ahmad Patel, Oscar Fernandes and Salman Khurshid spent as many as twenty hours a day.

Once the elections were over, 99 South Avenue began seeing factional wars among the party leaders. By January 2006, internal bickering within the Congress gained such proportions that the flat had to be locked up to prevent its 'misuse'. Party leaders Janardan Dwivedi, Jairam Ramesh and Salman Khurshid had chalked out their own courses and often worked at cross-purposes. What was worse was that Sonia was constantly flooded with complaints about the flat serving as a 'conspiracy centre' against one leader or the other. Fed up with the squabbles, Sonia ordered AICC treasurer Motilal Vora to close shop. But the warring factions did not give up their squabbles. As one of them put in, 'It all goes on, keeps working in the mind.'

As the general elections of 2009 inched closer, 15 Gurudwara Rakabganj Road became a rival to 24 Akbar Road. While Motilal Vora continued to chew paan and offer endless cups of tea to his visitors, including the media, the 'action' had shifted a few kilometres away. 15 Gurudwara Rakabganj Road belonged to Shobhana Bhartia, the elegant proprietor of the Hindustan Times group, a Congress sympathizer and nominated member of the Rajya Sabha. As Bhartia, a vegetarian and fitness fanatic, had her own comfortable residence in the posh Friends' Colony complete with a home gym, she donated the house to the Congress just as R.P. Goenka had given it 99 South Avenue.

Every day, seventeen senior Congress leaders would meet at 11 a.m. in the 'war-room' and reassemble there at 6 p.m. In between, Rahul and a dozen or so professionals belonging to the country's leading ad agencies slipped in and out. Jairam Ramesh served as overall in-charge of the war-room, but other notables registering their presence there included Digvijaya Singh, Ahmed Patel, Oscar Fernandes, Ambika Soni, Vishwajeet Prithvijeet Singh, Prithviraj Chavan and Janardan Dwivedi.

Unlike 24 Akbar Road, entry to 15 Gurudwara Rakabganj Road was severely restricted, and confidentiality and coordination were at a premium. This was evident when senior leader and the then Union human resource development Minister, Arjun Singh, expressed a desire to be part of it.

Arjun never received an invitation. Privately, some party leaders mocked him, saying Arjun would do better to manage his own war

room at home, in a reference to his daughter, Beena, who had turned 'rebel' candidate and was contesting as an independent from the Sidhi Lok Sabha seat in Madhya Pradesh. The result was that Beena bagged just enough votes to get the official Congress nominee defeated.

At 15 Gurudwara Rakabganj Road, the Congress spin doctors' prime task was to market the Manmohan Singh– Sonia Gandhi duo. In marketing terms, it was not an easy task because the anti-incumbency factor tends to work at different levels. People had seen what the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) could do and had not done. They had learnt a lot about them since 2004. Therefore, there was a need to package the UPA's quest for a second term in a certain fashion. Unlike in 2004, the Congress was not hampered by a shoestring budget. It hired the best experts from marketing, brand line, advertising and media.

The Congress spin doctors were unanimous in their opinion that in the complex political situation that existed in early 2009, their objective should be to create a niche for the party and develop a sense of identity between the Congress leadership – Sonia–Manmohan–Rahul – and the masses. In this context, their task was to send out a message to the electorate that the Congress had continuity with change. The second practical problem was 'selling' the party, rather than the candidates in the fray. Then, there was a need to differentiate between the Congress and the other political parties.

Crisis management was another area that kept the Congress spin doctors constantly on edge. In fact, few senior leaders were clued into what was happening in the country. The unexpected event of a Sikh journalist hurling a shoe at Union home minister P. Chidambaram at a press conference at 24 Akbar Road suddenly brought into focus the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. The Congress had to withdraw two of its candidates from Delhi, Sajjan Kumar and Jagdish Tytler, who had been accused of involvement in the riots, after they were named party nominees. In the war room, the 'Shoegate–Tytler episode' was termed as a case of a Chinese battery exploding suddenly and opening a Pandora's box.

At the same time, the Congress spin doctors were conscious of the fact that a high-pitch campaign like the one the BJP had opted for in 2004 would not work. The party managers carefully chose radio, particularly private FM channels, for their political campaign, instead of concentrating on television. Unlike TV or print, radio had no literacy barrier and provided constant reach. Thus, it was a better source to circulate local issues; FM channels in particular were good for this. The idea apparently came from AICC general secretary Digvijaya Singh and Union minister Anand Sharma. According to Digvijaya Singh and Jairam Ramesh, 70 per cent of the party ads were

to go to the regional media.

The war room boys tried to find holes in the BJP campaign, too. The BJP had carefully cultivated and latched on to L.K. Advani's image and come up with the slogan, '*Mazboot neta, nirnayak sarkar* (Strong leader, decisive government)'. The Congress fielded Dr Manmohan Singh to find holes in the BJP campaign. Manmohan Singh, who had campaigned very little in the 2004 or earlier elections, launched a sustained and effective campaign puncturing Advani. Each day, talking points were passed on to him from the war room through the AICC general secretary and minister of state in the prime minister's office, Prithviraj Chavan. Manmohan Singh himself enjoyed targeting Advani, and many of the formulations, such as 'For five years, I have been at the receiving end', were the good doctor's own. This was in sharp contrast to his role in 2004, when the party strategists had organized a few meetings in Delhi where he had spelt out the Congress stand on economic issues. But several of these meetings, including one in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, were called off reportedly because of lack of enthusiasm among the participants.

In 2009, Manmohan Singh emerged as a potent 'voice' along with Sonia and Rahul Gandhi, needling Opposition bigwigs with cultured barbs at L.K. Advani.

Manmohan Singh, attacked for being a 'weak PM' for the umpteenth time by Advani, retorted that he might not be a good speaker, but was better than the BJP leader at taking decisions and suggested that those who inherit their parents' culture do not use 'abusive' language. All the seventeen senior leaders in the war room savoured Manmohan Singh's polished rapier play, describing him as the clear winner over the BJP's candidate for prime minister.

As he has himself confessed, Manmohan Singh might not have been the best public speaker in the country, but when he spoke, the words seemed to come straight from his heart and he sounded convincing to the silent majority. Manmohan Singh cited how, when Advani was home minister, India had witnessed several terrorist attacks and how his cabinet colleague, Jaswant Singh, had accompanied terrorists to Afghanistan to set them free. At Kochi, Manmohan Singh trained his guns on the communists, citing how they had repeatedly chosen the 'wrong' side on political issues, from the Quit India Movement to the Green Revolution and then the Telecom Revolution.

'When our country got freedom, they said it was not true Independence,' Manmohan Singh said, adding: 'The Left Front or the so-called third front can never by themselves form a government at the centre. They can only divide the secular votes. Thereby, they can

only strengthen the BJP.'

When Lalu Prasad tarred the Congress with the Babri Masjid brush, the core group's response, right from the start, was to let it pass (other than getting the prime minister to make a factual statement on the centre's role during the demolition).

When the BJP launched its 'Bhay Ho (Fear)' reply to the Congress's 'Jai Ho' campaign, Atul Hegde of Ignitee Digital Solutions said at 15 Gurudwara Rakabganj Road: 'Within two days of the "Jai Ho" launch, the film received more than thirty thousand views and has now become the most discussed video on Internet social sites.'

While the war-room was busy fighting such intense battles, the old-timers and puritans at 24 Akbar Road scoffed at these spin doctors and their ability to deliver. A cabinet colleague of Manmohan Singh narrated a story to illustrate his line of argument. He said that many months ago in Canada, someone offered clean, bottled mountain air by mail order. Thousands responded with money and received empty bottles. 'The political campaigns are similarly packaged,' he said with a chuckle.

On 16 May, the Congress once again emerged as the hand of India, reinforcing the belief that voters still considered it their best bet to carry forward the national identity of a vibrant, secular, plural, resurgent country. Facing 24 Akbar Road minutes after the victory, Sonia said, 'Eventually, the people of India know what is good for them and always take the right decision.'

Given the culture of leader worship in the Congress, no one would openly weigh Sonia against Indira, but comparisons are inevitable if only because they share a name. And if only because they're both women leading the country's oldest party in circumstances very different, but also similar in that each has had to captain her ship in stormy waters.

Sonia considers Indira her role model, with whom comparisons are, by definition, not possible. But her style of functioning is also sharply different from that of her mother-in-law, who was not known to be particularly democratic in the way she ran the party.

But Sonia's task of reviving the party has been more daunting than during the Indira era – when there were no powerful regional parties to battle, nor any of the compulsions of coalition politics. For the most part of her tenure, Indira's Congress had a strong social base of Brahmins, Dalits and minorities, and her standing among the scheduled tribes was unchallenged. Once she had established her authority after the Congress split, Indira didn't have to worry about winning the elections until she lost her head and declared the Emergency.

Sonia, on the contrary, had everything going against her. When

she took charge, the BJP was growing in power. Congress leaders refer to Sonia's own comment in 1998 saying that she was not Jawaharlal Nehru's daughter to illustrate the difficulties she had to face till 2004 when she led the party to power. She had said this when Sharad Pawar, P.A. Sangma and Tariq Anwar raised the bogey of her foreign origin.

When power awaited her at the door of 10 Janpath, Sonia made Manmohan Singh the prime minister – a step that would not have been expected of Indira who, in her time, did not allow what she considered parallel centres of power to develop. For five years, Sonia tried to stay in the background while Manmohan Singh ran the country amid loud whispers of conflict that never developed into anything serious.

The grooming of the heir apparent, Rahul, is also being done in a manner quite different from Indira's approach. The late prime minister's critics said she had given Sanjay too much power too quickly and, to a lesser extent, to Rajiv, too. Rahul's climb has been slow and steady. Before this election, he was only an MP with a famous surname who led the party's *babalog*. He was not made a minister, nor given a disproportionately large role in the party set-up.

By March 2011 when the Wikileaks, 2G scam and Commonwealth Games scam started making headlines and startling disclosures, the UPA under Sonia–Manmohan appeared defensive. This was in sharp contrast to the upbeat mood of May 2009 when the Congress party won 206 Lok Sabha seats on its own. Paradoxically, most of these challenges came from within – not from without. These events showed that both Sonia and Manmohan lacked a firm grip on the Congress.

The Congress sought to score a self-goal of sorts when in July 2009 it went public, opposing Manmohan's initiative to sign an agreement with his Pakistani counterpart at Sharmel-Sheikh, Egypt. Somehow, the grand old party failed to capitalize on improving Indo–Pak relations. The party's 'disconnect' became more visible in the manner in which it handled the Telengana agitation and the demand for a separate state. Andhra Pradesh, which gave 33 of its 42 Lok Sabha seats to the party, saw some inept handling by the Congress high command when its most trusted lieutenant Y.S. Rajshekhar Reddy died in a tragic air crash on 3 September 2009. YSR was a leader gifted with many of the skills a politician requires – mass appeal, resources, political acumen, and administrative experience.

In fact, since 2004, YSR's standing had been several notches above the other chief ministers of the Congress-ruled states. If some of the welfare schemes in irrigation and rural healthcare helped him score points, so did his loyalty to the Nehru–Gandhi family. In 2005, he

equated Sonia with Mahatma Gandhi, even though he took care never to flaunt his proximity to 10 Janpath.

The late YSR's son Jagan turned a rebel after Sonia rejected his bid to step into father's shoes. Jagan defied party diktat and floated a breakaway YSR Congress after repeatedly getting sidelined. It remains to be seen if history will repeat itself in Andhra. In 1983, actor N.T. Rama Rao was denied a ticket to contest for the Congress in the 1983 elections by the then party chief Indira Gandhi. In retaliation, Rao had launched his own party, Telugu Desam Party or TDP, and swept to a landslide victory in the state's assembly election.

On his part, Manmohan's inability to take action on corruption charges against his Telecommunications Minister Andimuthu Raja proved very costly. Dr Singh was aware of the 2G scam much before it erupted like a volcano but he kept dithering, intead of acting decisively on the isuue. He continued to send feelers to the DMK chief M. Karunanidhi, holding consultations with him.

Most of the ministers in Manmohan's cabinet lacked accountability. When the UPA-II was formed in May 2009, it had promised to set an agenda to take action in its first 100 days of power. However, even after four years, most ministries struggled with the same old issues of governance. Privately, many Congress leaders said the prime minister was not being assertive in reining in ministers who belonged to UPA allies, or even those from his own party.

Slowly, Manmohan's image as an honest leader has begun to lose its sheen because he is increasingly seen as someone ready to tolerate dishonesty even from his own council of ministers. The Congress has, till now, always sought to put the blame on its allies' lack of ethics.

At 24 Akbar Road, the absence of a think tank or working group has prevented the party from initiating innovative ideas or running orientation programmes for newcomers. The party seems strangled in the vice-like grip of inertia, nepotism and corruption. While the dreamers in the national headquarters keep thinking about a single party government in the future, the pragmatic elements within the party draw solace from a vibrant economy and a disunited Opposition. The main Opposition, the BJP, remains confined to the battle of one-upmanship and is floundering on the ideological front.

A Union minister known for his quick wit equated the Congress with the Mughals claiming that they were both destined to rule. The UPA, he said would continue to focus on welfare programmes to reach out to the Dalits, the tribals, the Muslims and the poor till around 2014 when the next round of general elections will be held.

Till then, the two centres of power will continue to hold sway – Manmohan with his cabinet and Sonia with the National Advisory Council (NAC).

With a blurred line of authority to answer to, Congressmen do not seem to be bothered by where the authority of one begins and that of the other ends, as long as Manmohan remains aware of his limits, and the troika of Sonia–Rahul– Manmohan ensures that the Congress continues to win elections.

chapter ten

A New Prince

The script for a 'bigger role' for Rahul Gandhi, who was made Congress vice-president at the Jaipur 'Chintan Shivir' on 19 January 2013, was written on 9 December 2012 when Sonia Gandhi turned 66.

The party president had earlier told senior All India Congress Committee officials that she planned to retire from active politics at the age of 70. Stunned by the announcement – after all, hardly any Indian politician ever retires – nervous party leaders requested her to let Rahul 'take charge'. Efforts to persuade the 42-year-old Rahul began but the then AICC general secretary dithered. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh once again pointed at his repeated offers to Rahul to join the cabinet.

To the outside world, the prime minister has always appeared to be Sonia and Rahul Gandhi's cipher, but in reality, they hold him in awe, acknowledging his intellect and experience, and trusting his judgement. This was evident in the manner Sonia had backed him on the Indo-US nuclear deal. Instead of siding with the Left leadership, which was offering itself as 'trusted friends' during the much protracted negotiations over the deal, Sonia went along with Singh's conviction that the deal would be advantageous to India, particularly with regard to energy security and environmental protection. Further, Singh was convinced that the deal would not in any way affect the country's ability to pursue its nuclear weapons programme.

This was an important factor in why the division of power between the Congress president and the prime minister has clicked for so long – from 2004 till date. The Manmohan Singh government has followed Sonia's broad agenda – liberal economics with an inclusive emphasis – and she has been content to let the prime minister get on with the job as he sees best.

When Sonia announced her retirement, Singh insisted that Rahul choose between a cabinet berth and the formal number two position in the Congress. The prime minister conveyed to Rahul that his reluctance to be an effective power centre was hurting both party and government. Rahul then agreed to opt for organizational work. A reasoning for his choosing the party over a ministerial berth was that he firmly believes 'one man on a horse' cannot save India. Perhaps drawing from the (in)experience of his father, Rajiv Gandhi – who

became prime minister at 37 – Rahul feels disinclined to become a minister just to adorn the office; he would rather make a substantial difference to the polity and government.

This was not the first time, however, that two members of the Nehru–Gandhi family would be holding high posts simultaneously. In 1959, Indira Gandhi became Congress president, much to the surprise of most party members, at a time when her father was prime minister. Jawaharlal Nehru's critics bristled at the move but a large section in the Congress felt that the daughter had earned her position through merit. Indira deftly tackled a crisis in Kerala, when a communist government headed by E.M.S. Namboodiripad was dismissed on 31 July 1959, on grounds of its failure to check left-wing violence in the state. After visiting Kerala, she had described the situation as 'thick walls of group hatred' all around. She had also recommended the creation of the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat to end linguistic strife in the erstwhile Bombay state. When her term ended in 1960, the Congress Working Committee requested her to stand for re-election, but she refused.

During Indira's prime-ministership, her younger son Sanjay Gandhi called the shots in the party for several years in the 1970s but did not opt for a formal post. His brother Rajiv, however, became general secretary in 1983, two years after joining politics. Ostensibly, the appointment of Rajiv as general secretary was to lessen Indira's burden, who was then both prime minister and Congress president, but the real purpose of his appointment was to 'groom' him as a future leader. Cabinet ministers began queuing up outside Rajiv's office next to Indira's chamber at 24 Akbar Road. Seen as a 'doer', any project or proposal struck in the prime minister's office would be expedited if Rajiv asked for the 'needful to be done'.

However, between September 2006 and January 2013 when Rahul served as AICC general secretary, there was a clear demarcation between the roles and domains of Sonia and Rahul. Ministers, other than those belonging to Team Rahul, were discouraged from calling on him. As Congress general secretary, Rahul largely confined himself to the affairs of the Youth Congress and its student wing, the National Students' Union of India.

At another level, despite Rahul Gandhi's elevation to the post of vice-president, Sonia's retirement deadline continues to rattle Congress party leaders. If she actually goes ahead and formally retires, it will be another first after her 2004 renunciation of the prime minister's post. Amid the jubilation at Rahul's anointment as the vice-president at the Jaipur session, many in the Congress are still nervous. The anxiety stems from their experience of major changes each time a transition in the leadership takes place. For example, when Rajiv

replaced Sanjay, many close Sanjay associates discovered they were 'misfits' in the elder brother's team. Ram Chandra Rath, the powerful Youth Congress chief, found his influence waning quickly after Rajiv was appointed general secretary. After Rajiv's assassination, many of his aides such as M.L. Fotedar were evicted by successor P.V. Narasimha Rao. Sitaram Kesri's rule saw the swift exit of Janardhana Poojary, Bhuvnesh Chaturvedi and others who were close to Rao. When Sonia took over, many leaders claiming proximity to Rajiv, Narasimha Rao or Kesri lost out. It remains to be seen how some key Sonia advisers fare under Rahul.

Some senior Congress leaders, however, believe that the real impact of Rahul's elevation will be felt through his policies, planning and style of functioning.

Sonia Gandhi is seen as too tolerant a person who avoids enforcing discipline but has a knack for winning over adversaries and reaching out to alliance leaders. She also leans left-of-centre on most policy matters. In contrast, Rahul is seen among the ranks as a leader in the Rajiv–Sanjay mould – frank and decisive. His thrust on reforms, urban voters, technology, the youth and gender sensitivity may force many party leaders and regional satraps to shape up or ship out.

Changes were immediately visible once Rahul took over. Many in the Congress began opting for BlackBerry phones and opened personal Twitter and Facebook accounts sensing Rahul's priority on social media. This change in the style of functioning was evident when Stephanie Cutter, a reputed political consultant who served as deputy campaign manager for US President Barack Obama's 2012 re-election campaign, was seen at 12 Tughlaq Crescent – an address that serves as Rahul's office-cum-residence. In an hour-long meeting with Rahul, she told him bluntly that Indian politicians did not understand social media. Rahul smiled and nodded in agreement.

Cutter, nicknamed as 'Ninja' and 'Box Cutter' during the Obama campaign for her ability to stealthily insert herself into battles, then visited 15 Gurudwara Rakabgunj Marg, which serves as the Congress 'War Room'. Cutter was far from impressed even though leaders like Jairam Ramesh, Sam Pitroda and others tried to showcase their back-to-back electoral victories in 2004 and 2009. She reportedly cited her own example as a one-woman attack squad. She told Team Rahul that instead of becoming a popular figure, she became a polarizing face of the campaign and chief messenger, a loyal soldier who said things that the leader could not or would not say. Cutter emphasized that in her role, there was no scope for errors or losses.

Soon after Cutter left, Rahul formed a quick response team comprising the party's old guard and young upcoming faces. The seven-member group included Ahmed Patel, Digvijaya Singh,

Janardan Dwivedi and V. Narayanasamy from the old guard while Manish Tewari, Sandeep Dikshit and Deepender Singh Hooda were brought in from the younger crop of leaders. In Rahul's scheme of things, this team would respond in any crisis situation. Once a line of attack or defence – depending upon the nature of the crisis – is taken, it will be communicated on all available forums including Twitter where Tewari, Hooda and Digvijaya had become prolific 'Tweeters' with a large following. Social media was highlighted as an important vehicle to counter the opposition and civil society criticism or propaganda against the Congress.

THE CII ADDRESS

Rahul Gandhi's address to the CII on 4 April 2013 was an eagerly anticipated affair. He was under pressure to exhibit his 'vision' for the future following his emotional speech made at Jaipur, wherein he touched upon the nature of the office that he held and his vision for the party. The Jaipur address also gave a glimpse into what Rahul's priorities would be; he spoke about the weaknesses of the current education system, the gross centralization of power that exists in India, and the necessity to devolve power so that those at the bottom benefit from it. 'We should not chase power for the attributes of power. We should only use it to empower the voiceless,' he said.

Since his appointment as vice-president, Rahul had been busy travelling, interacting with individual MPs and attending Parliament. But the seemingly normal state of affairs made several Congress leaders restless, who wondered if the 'catalyst for change' – as several Congress leaders and insiders call him – was turning status quo-ist. Rahul needed to address his vision, and several suggestions were made as possible venues, but he reportedly chose to accept the prime minister's advice to speak at the CII Conference. Manmohan Singh's tip to him was simple – say whatever he planned to convey without any inhibition. Singh cited his own difficulties while ushering in massive restructuring and reforms in 1991 when he had taken over as finance minister as example.

Speaking before a packed audience of industry captains, the central theme of his 28-minute speech was that the government cannot be expected to solve all the problems that beset the country. 'If you expect Manmohanji to solve your problems, keep expecting. You have to take the lead and create jobs,' he told the industrialists. 'The government's job is to improve the playing field and provide a rule-based, impartial governance system.'

Priya Sahgal, political editor of NewsX channel, who had earlier broken the news of Cutter meeting Rahul for the *Sunday Guardian*, feels his speech did not have a direct input from Cutter. Instead,

inputs were taken from his mentor Sam Pitroda, Dr G. Mohan Gopal – director at the Delhi-based Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Contemporary Studies, Jairam Ramesh and Sachin Rao, a close aide. According to Priya, who was Rahul's contemporary at St. Stephen's College, he is deeply influenced by Barack Obama and his election campaigns. A draft paper, prepared as the party's 'Agenda 2014', even has a separate chapter on Obama.

Rahul's speech was heard in rapt attention. Among those in attendance were industrialists Adi Godrej, Sunil Mittal, Rahul Bajaj, Shivinder Singh, S. Gopalakrishnan and Naveen Jindal, and technocrats such as Montek Singh Ahluwalia and Sam Pitroda. His speech was followed by a Q&A session which saw a more confident Rahul replying to queries from the audience. Ajay Shriram of DCM Shriram asked him about the equation between central and state governments. Rahul seized the opportunity to talk about his favourite theme of how everything boils downs to how much power is given to people at the local level. 'Our political structure is [currently] not designed to include *pradhans* in policy decisions. The *pradhan* is the person who is connected to the people in villages. Why does the smallest decision have to be taken by the senior-most person? We need to build architecture to enable *pradhans* to develop policy at the lower levels.'

The next question was from Dhruv Sawhney of Triveni Engineering, who wanted to know how the country's water problems could be solved. Rahul again chose to not directly respond to it. Instead, he blamed political parties, including his own, for not addressing the country's problems. Pacing up and down in Town Hall style interface, Rahul lamented that when it comes to selecting candidates for elections, all political parties together have just about 200 people deciding which people will get the tickets to fight elections. There was need to empower everybody; not 'one person, not almost everybody, but everybody'. He argued that whenever India has done well, it has done so not by incremental steps but by radically transforming the structure. 'Look at our successes, from the Green Revolution to the White Revolution and the IT and telecom revolutions, all those successes were results of exponential thinking,' he said.

There were more punch lines to follow. Rahul said Indians have a tendency to talk about individuals. 'Many people predict the probability of me becoming the prime minister, [of] when I [will] get married…' He paused and then added, 'All that is irrelevant. It is not important what I think, [what] is [more] important [is] what a billion people think. We are more powerful than we think.'

Talking about the potential of India's billion-strong population

seems to be Rahul's pet theme. While speaking about the Union Budget in 2009, Rahul had then remarked, 'I am new to politics and still have a lot to learn. But if there is one thing I have learnt it is that people who are closer to a problem understand it best. Empower them. Make them accountable and you will get results.'

A year and a half later, Rahul told the Congress rank and file at the Talkatora plenary in December 2010, '…there is one thing I am certain of. We will never build a nation until we start recognizing and respecting the common man. We will never build a nation until we build a system in which man's progress is based not on who he knows but on what he knows. This is the challenge of our generation.' Again at Jaipur this year, he said, 'The voices of a billion Indians are today telling us that they want a greater say in government, in politics and in administration. They are telling us that the course of their lives cannot be decided by a handful of people behind closed doors who are not fully accountable to them. They are telling us that India's governmental system is stuck in the past. It has become a system that robs people of their voice, a system that dis-empowers instead of empowering.'

For many, Rahul's speech to the CII was important because it marked his first public declamation after BJP's informal prime ministerial candidate and Gujarat chief minister Narendra Modi had made two speeches in Delhi, first at Sri Ram College and another at the India Today conclave. Political analyst Sheela Bhatt compared the two speakers and said, 'Rahul stands for the human face of development and Modi for a convincing action-plan of development, as he sees it.' Rahul chose to target Modi's politics gently, by branding it personality-based, not inclusive and not people-oriented, Bhatt wrote, 'intentionally or otherwise, to position himself at the other end of spectrum where Modi stands. Modi and Rahul are moving in the opposite directions. One wants to move in a fast lane of development and the other wants to ensure that the "voices of people" be heard while marching ahead.' Rahul was aware of Modi's personal attacks on him, but he avoided being dragged into it. Modi was spotted at Sri Ram College in a designer kurta and a Gucci stole while Rahul chose an ordinary cotton kurta-pyjama for his speech at the CII conference. For some, Modi appeared unerring and frighteningly strong, while Rahul appeared a tad nervous, sometimes confident, sometimes stubborn and sometimes naive.

Rahul's Q&A session at the CII also had a distinct Amartya Sen stamp. In a interview to Vinod Mehta and Anjali Puri to *Outlook* in August 2009, Nobel laureate Sen had described Rahul as 'talented' and equated the young Congress leader with Dr Manmohan Singh in terms of being deeply concerned about deprivation in India and wanting to

make a change. The noted economist had said, 'I know him [Rahul] a certain amount. I once actually spent a day with him when he visited me in Trinity [Cambridge] and I was very impressed with him.' Rahul was a student at Trinity from October 1994 to July 1995 and was awarded M. Phil in Development Studies.

Sen, awarded the Bharat Ratna in 1999 by the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led NDA government, had said that the possibility of Rahul becoming prime minister could not be ruled out. '… we chatted about what he was planning to do. At that time, politics was not part of his plan at all, and he told me that. I believe those were his genuine views and he changed his mind later. It was very clear to me that he was very committed to Indian development.'

Sen said he had told Rahul that there were ways for him to 'dazzle the world' with the money he could make. 'But he wasn't in the least interested. I would say, since I have known Manmohan at the same age, that there was a very similar commitment in both of them, in terms of being deeply concerned about deprivation in India and wanting to make a change in that. And to devote one's lifetime to that.'

Cambridge has influenced Rahul quite a bit. Speaking to the Cambridge campus paper *Varsity* in 2010, Rahul told Merrow Golden and Ashleigh Lamming, two political science students, that the most important thing he learned at Cambridge was the 'importance of compromise'. Lamming recalls Rahul as saying the Cambridge system had helped him learn how to not just 'argue for his own opinions, but to find a solution that takes all points of view into account.'

Aarthi Ramachandran, author of an independent biography on Rahul called *Decoding Rahul Gandhi* (Tranquebar 2012), has elaborately quoted Lamming as saying that during the interview, Rahul had expressed himself as an 'economist'. 'He tended to talk about things using economic language; he talked about affirmative action as being a problem of "supply and demand", and…talked about teachers no longer having a "monopoly" over information, but being one of the many sources of it.' Apparently, during the interview, Rahul reached for a pen and drew an elaborate economic diagram to illustrate a teacher as being one competing source of information. Lamming added that Rahul appeared very fond of Cambridge as a town, and of Trinity College in particular. Rahul told him that he had changed a lot since completing his M. Phil in 1995. He disagreed with a lot of what he was taught at Cambridge. 'I am a lot less left-wing now than I was, for one thing.'

THE DEBACLE IN UP

Rahul Gandhi's style of functioning as party general secretary between

2007 and 2013, and now as the vice-president of the party, showed that he did not seem in a great hurry or had a fixed plan. There were some who thought his way to political power in Delhi was via Lucknow, but the assembly polls of 2012 proved disastrous for both Rahul and the Congress, winning just twenty-eight seats and coming in fourth. A folktale about an unworldly professor's efforts to cross a river with his family started doing the rounds in the party post the elections, in the guise of holding some relevance to the Congress's poll strategy for Uttar Pradesh under Rahul. Apparently, the professor had calculated the river's depth, compared it with the average height of his family members and then happily crossed it. But his young children, shorter than the average height he had calculated, drowned, leaving their father wondering: '*Hisaab joon ka toon, kunba dubaa kyon* (Why did my family drown despite my calculations being right?).'

Many Congress old-timers felt that the party's calculations for the Uttar Pradesh assembly elections were based on similarly mistaken premises. Despite showing the most aggression during the campaign, they say the party was poorly prepared to take on seasoned opponents like Mulayam Singh Yadav, Mayawati and the BJP. While Rahul succeeded in making a splash himself, the media glare, the unusually high expectations and belligerent remarks from senior leaders such as Salman Khurshid, Beni Prasad Verma, Sriprakash Jaiswal and Digvijaya Singh proved counter-productive to the party's prospects. Before the Assembly elections, Khurshid, as Union law minister, toyed with the idea of job quotas for Muslims which the Election Commission viewed as an electoral malpractice. At another occasion, while the UP election campaign was going on, Beni Prasad Verma called for a Congress tie-up with rival Mayawati. Verma's words were at odds with the entire UP script of the Congress, which had been all about ridding the state of the Mayawati regime. Right through the elections, the Congress had asserted that it would form its own government in UP. Rahul kept terming Uttar Pradesh his *karma-bhoomi* and repeatedly stressed his resolve to lead the state from the front. Yet he avoided projecting himself as a chief ministerial candidate despite the opportunity it offered, in case of a victory, for hands-on experience of governing a sixth of India's population.

In state elections, it takes someone charismatic like Nitish Kumar, Naveen Patnaik or Mamata Banerjee to trigger a vote for change. Uttar Pradesh's electorate probably did not want to vote for the likes of Jaiswal, Verma or Khurshid who are hardly household names, Congress insiders suggest.

Rahul had started off well, telling a large rally in Phulpur on 14 November 2011, 'When I see such injustices in Uttar Pradesh, I wonder why I don't come and live in Lucknow and take up your

battle.' But he did not follow up on his words. Sources close to the Amethi MP claim that Rahul had seriously considered becoming the candidate for chief minister but the AICC shot down the idea. The question currently being asked in party circles is that how something as important as this was not discussed at the Congress Working Committee. Apparently, Rahul's aides cited two reasons why he should not take up any position in Uttar Pradesh. One, it is not an easy state to govern. Two, Rahul cannot restrict himself to a particular state or region. The argument was that if Rahul identified himself with Uttar Pradesh and if for some reason the voters rejected him, it would affect the party's goal of establishing a government under his leadership in Delhi.

Under Rahul's leadership, many old-timers say, there has been no sign of the 'comfort zone' of senior leaders coming under scrutiny. Congress insiders also feel that Rahul's lack of rapport with regional leaders and prospective allies such as Mamata Banerjee, Sharad Pawar and M. Karunanidhi can become a hurdle to his playing a direct role in governance. His stringent criticism of Samajwadi Party leader Mulayam Singh Yadav and BSP supremo Mayawati – both of whom later bailed out UPA-II on many occasions – during the assembly elections campaigning was seen as a mistake. A Congress veteran was heard reciting an Urdu couplet by Bashir Badr that used to be former party stalwart Tarkeshwari Sinha's favourite: '*Dushmani jam kar karo magar ye gunjaeesh rahe, jab kabhi hum dost ho jayen to sharminda na hon* (Be a fierce enemy but make sure that if you become friends some day, there's no reason to be embarrassed).'

Had Rahul looked around closely during the campaign, he might have noticed that in Allahabad, a certain Amitabh Bachchan Fan Club – formed during the actor's 1984 Lok Sabha victory against Hemvati Nandan Bahugana – is now firmly aligned with the BJP.

Then there was the matter of candidate selection. In most constituencies, the homes of local heavyweights rather than the district Congress committee served as the centre for poll-related activities. During the screening of candidates, most district committee recommendations were not even discussed. Some 30 per cent of the candidates were picked from 'outside' the traditional Congress pool – political renegades and discards from other parties. Rahul had played an important role in the screening and final selection of candidates.

According to Nirmal Pathak, political editor of the daily *Hindustan*, the reason behind Congress's success in the 2009 parliamentary elections was due to the return of Muslim votes along with a consolidation of upper-caste votes in its favour. 'In UP 2012, Brahmin and Rajput voters moved towards Mulayam Singh Yadav for a "better deal" in terms of ministerial berths and other perks," he said.

‘Voters made a clever distinction between Congress at the federal level – strong and capable of checking a right-wing BJP – and weak and incapable at the state level in UP, where the SP emerged as a credible alternative to the BJP and the BSP.’

Despite the setback of the UP elections, one impression stood out – that Rahul is not blinded by an ambition to become prime minister. Since 2004, Sonia Gandhi has shown how a politician can stay relevant and serve the nation even without holding the top job, and Rahul seems to be following a similar path.

THE CONGRESS UNDER RAHUL GANDHI

Many in the Congress are jittery about the purge they fear Rahul Gandhi might carry out to mould the party in his preferred shape, probably before the 2014 parliamentary elections. The current feeling is that only two types of leaders will thrive under him: those capable of winning elections, and the cerebral types with a technological-professional background. If Rahul translates his words into action, vast numbers of ‘rootless wonders’ who have been banking on loyalty and sycophancy will be the worst losers.

For Rahul, a purge would, in a way, represent an unfinished agenda he has inherited from his father. During the Congress centennial in 1985, a 41-year-old Rajiv, his ‘Mr Clean’ image still unscathed in popular perception, had hit out at power brokers within the party before a gathering at Mumbai’s Brabourne Stadium. ‘Brokers of power and influence who dispense patronage to convert a mass movement into a feudal oligarchy,’ he had said, ‘thrive by invoking slogans of caste and religion and by enmeshing the living body of the Congress.’

Rajiv had appointed Arjun Singh as vice-president to cleanse the Congress, but the move didn’t bring about the changes he wanted. The plan to ‘modernize’ the Congress was challenged by then party working president Kamalapati Tripathi. The veteran Congressman wrote a letter, whose contents were selectively leaked to the media, questioning the efforts. Tripathi asked Rajiv why ‘professionals’ who were ‘good for nothing’ had been brought into the organization. Referring to the ‘power broker’ remark – Rajiv had taken no names – Tripathi cited how, when the entire Congress brass had deserted Indira in 1978, he had not been found wanting in loyalty.

The present-day Congress similarly doesn’t lack leaders who want a Rahul-led Congress to taste electoral success yet wish he would fail in his efforts to cleanse the party. They don’t want him to act as a ‘judge for all’ – the newly appointed vice-president had remarked at the Jaipur Chintan Shivir that he would perform the role of a ‘judge, not a lawyer’ – as he promised, but as an advocate of identity politics,

promoting 'talent' only with the tags of caste, sub-caste and religion attached.

However, many Congress veterans continued with their old tricks. Rahul's attempt to marginalize regional clout was negated in election-bound Madhya Pradesh, where a powerful trio emerged consisting of Jyotiraditya Scindia, Kamal Nath and Digvijaya Singh. The trio, known adversaries in Madhya Pradesh politics, closed ranks to reward their supporters in the state Congress Committee. The executive panel announced in the last week of May 2013, barely six months before the Madhya Pradesh assembly polls, was packed with office bearers owing loyalty to the trio, in defiance of Rahul's speech in Bhopal on 24–25 April 2013. Rahul had then told Congress workers to 'not waste' time playing court to regional satraps and promised that party posts and tickets for Assembly polls would not be given on their recommendations. Also, a number of politicians who had joined the Congress only recently were given posts, although Rahul had spoken against it. Digvijaya's brother Laxman Singh, who had left the Congress just before the 2004 general elections and returned to the parent organization earlier this year, was made the vice-president of the MPCC. The list of MPCC office bearers was prepared at the residence of a Union minister whose house was at a walking distance of Rahul's office-cum-residence. A conservative estimate suggested 50 per cent of the 25 vice-presidents and 26 general secretaries in the executive committee had been appointed because of their loyalty to the Scindia–Nath–Singh trio. A rationale behind the tacit understanding is believed to be to keep state party chief Kantilal Bhuria, a tribal, under check.

Team Rahul is also believed to be working on a plan that aims to reward performance and quick response. Ticket aspirants who can produce Excel sheets on Aadhar cardholders and cash-transfer beneficiaries in their constituencies are likely to have the edge over those armed merely with recommendations from regional bosses. Between 2007 and 2012, Rahul carried out a talent hunt in the Youth Congress and the Congress student wing NSUI through questionnaires that sought the exact volume of India's foreign trade or the number of mobile phone owners in the aspirant's Assembly segment. Mathew Kuzhalanandan, then a PhD student at JNU, interacted with Rahul in 2007 expecting questions on the Congress ideology and manifesto. Instead, he was asked about poverty, international trade, and bombings. 'I was taken aback. But it was an inspiring occasion that helped me understand Rahul's world view and his way of thinking,' Kuzhalanandan says.

Rahul's ascendance within the party has coincided with the rise of Narendra Modi as BJP's prime ministerial aspirant. A debate within

the Congress that has gained momentum is whether Rahul should be projected as the prime ministerial nominee for the 2014 general elections or whether Manmohan Singh should pitch for his third term in office. In the absence of a clear statement from either Sonia or Rahul Gandhi, the debate became a free-for-all in the Congress. AICC general secretary Digvijaya Singh took the lead in clarifying that Rahul had asked him to 'correct' an impression that he was unwilling to become prime minister. Rahul, according to him, had conveyed that becoming prime minister was not his 'sole object'. The Digvijaya statement led to some resentment at 24 Akbar Road, where office bearers felt the clarification should have come from Rahul himself, instead of Digvijaya projecting himself as a credible voice for the young vice-president. Barely had the dust settled down than Prime Minister Manmohan Singh himself opened a can of worms cautiously commenting that he was not averse to the idea of serving another term if voters posed the confidence in him and the UPA while on his way back from Durban.

Once Digvijaya Singh's comments came in the open, the Congress media department in-charge and general secretary Janardan Dwivedi sought to distance the party from him. 'Rahul Gandhi has been made Congress vice-president. Since he has been given the responsibility of the organization, hence strengthening the party and organization is his priority. What happens thereafter is decided by the party. Today Manmohan Singh is the prime minister and this arrangement is working well.'

Congress insiders and those close to Rahul explain that the issue of bidding for the prime minister's post was a complex issue without a definitive 'yes' or 'no' answer. For both Sonia and Rahul, the office of the prime minister has been of secondary importance than primacy of the party in national politics. Secondly, drawing from the experience of Rajiv Gandhi, Rahul seems reluctant to adorn the high office without gaining wider acceptability along the lines of Indira Gandhi or Atal Bihari Vajpayee. At 42, he does not seem in a hurry to jump in. Senior journalist Kumar Ketkar points out that it has been 24 years since a member of the Nehru–Gandhi family was prime minister, after Rajiv demitted office on 2 December 1989.

However, political exigencies and equations within the Congress are such that Rahul cannot be seen as abdicating the prime ministerial post, thereby giving ambitious party leaders a free turn to scheme and manipulate. A senior Congress leader says, 'There is just one Manmohan among us – experienced, decent and detached. The rest of us are all political animals who need to be kept under leash. Else, the Congress would disintegrate like the Janata Party or Janata Dal.'

Sonia's long-term political strategy for 2014 and her possible retirement in 2016 hinges upon Manmohan's clean image and good governance plank. By 2014, the Congress, effectively under Rahul, would need to display Manmohan's tenure as exemplary. On the other hand, a tainted UPA-II may force the party to sit out as during 1996–2003 when Narasimha Rao's numerous acts of omissions and commissions had a telling effect on the Congress's fortunes.

Sonia's discomfort towards corruption within the party was evident in the manner in which she asked A.K. Antony to man the defence portfolio in the UPA-II government. In South Block, 'Mr Clean' Antony has a reputation of being a status quo-ist, a minister who is perpetually wary of catching a cold or clearing any project that may lead to a scandal. Antony's presence in the defence ministry helped Sonia tide over the AgustaWestland helicopter deal row and the thorny issue of Italian marines. Antony swiftly gave orders of a high-level inquiry into the helicopter deal and put it on hold before getting the Central Bureau of Investigation to investigate it. The defence minister subsequently admitted that corruption may have taken place in the Rs 3,700 crore deal and confirmed that CBI's investigations had established that bribes had been paid. 'I do feel somebody has taken money. The inquiry is at a crucial stage. We will not show mercy to anybody and will take action however powerful he may be,' Antony was quoted by news agencies. He said his ministry was in the final stages of preparing the New Procurement Policy, which will aggressively pursue indigenization. This policy, if adopted, will run counter to a recent suggestion by Commerce and Industry Minister Anand Sharma's strong pitch to raise the foreign investment limit in the defence sector to 74 per cent from 26 per cent currently. 'We are also very particular to aggressively pursue indigenization, especially after our many experiences… The new procedures will give further impetus and a new momentum to indigenization,' he said.

The politician that Sonia is, she is said to be acutely conscious that more than evidence or fact, perception is more important on sensitive matters like corruption in high places. So far, her assessment is that the integrity of the prime minister and the Congress leadership is somewhat intact, but the AICC chief seems to be mindful that the public's perception is changing and another scandal involving a Congress leader may drastically alter the entire game. At the UPA-II's fourth anniversary on 22 May 2013, Sonia went on the warfront saying, 'Corruption remains an issue that agitates us all and the public… We have been uncompromising in our approach to combat this scourge. We have nothing to feel defensive about… At the same

time, we need to be aware that there has been a calculated effort…to deliberately falsify and create innuendo, to spread misinformation and untruth. We must be alert and counter these campaigns.' Sonia claimed the UPA-II government had made a lot of difference on the ground and admonished reporters: 'You Dilliwallahs know nothing about the feelings of the people.'

Asked by the media whether he felt reassured following this unambiguous expression of support, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said he had never had any reason to feel otherwise during the past nine years as he always received 'full cooperation' from his party president. He responded with a couplet when asked if he was upbeat after the completion of nine years in office: '*Sitaron se aage jahaan aur bhi hain* (There are more worlds beyond the stars).' Ironically, the second line, which Singh did not recite, goes like this: '*Abhi ishq ke imtihan aur bhi hain* (More tests lie ahead).' Rahul Gandhi, too, dismissed the alleged differences between Sonia and Singh as 'propaganda by the Opposition and the media'. He said the 'collective leadership' projected in 2009 would remain unchanged in 2014.

However, Sheela Bhatt, who attended the dinner at the prime minister's residence to celebrate the fourth anniversary, sensed a definite discomfort among the ruling echelon. According to her, anniversaries are often dicey affairs – in one's life, in a nation's existence and even for political parties. If things are not going well, milestones are not easy to celebrate. 'Rather, it can make one uncomfortable. There was discomfort in the air at 7 Race Course Road,' she says.

The dual power-centre model and coalition dharma also poses its own problems for Sonia. When the UPA was formed in 2004, Sonia had cleverly earmarked a political role for herself as UPA chairperson while the executive role of running the government was assigned to her appointee, Dr Manmohan Singh. She kept denying that she was the 'power behind the throne.' Sonia told NDTV how she enjoyed a relationship of mutual trust with the prime minister: '…we are not competitors.'

But in practice, the Westminster parliamentary democracy model was designed as a prime ministerial democracy. The prime minister being 'the shining moon among lesser stars' was expected to act swiftly and often secretly as demonstrated by Indira Gandhi on numerous occasions. In the UPA, however, the decision-making process entails a huge consultation route, calling for meetings between the 'big two' and their set of advisors who often work at cross-purposes. For instance, when the enormity of A. Raja's alleged misdeeds in the 2G scam became apparent, the UPA for over six months did virtually nothing. Behind the screen, an anxious prime

minister and his men reportedly tried to gauge DMK supremo M. Karunanidhi's mood. Sonia was brought into the picture when intelligence agencies convinced the prime minister that a major scandal was about to break. The political leadership then reportedly engaged a former chief minister of Punjab to sound out a governor considered close to the DMK. By the time a reluctant Karunanidhi was made to see reason – with the prime minister's discomfort in Raja continuing office post his alleged involvement in 2G scam made prominent – the Opposition had decided to stall the Parliament session and demanded a joint parliamentary probe.

The UPA's frequent spat with the Supreme Court was another area of concern. Sources close to Sonia wondered why the apex court had suddenly started making stringent and strong remarks against the UPA. Unlike Indira Gandhi's battle against the judiciary over bank nationalization etc., this time around, the Congress was not in a position to strike back. Indira had earlier tried to have a compliant judiciary in the years preceding the Emergency. She had superseded senior judges and put in place her own appointees on the plea of setting up a 'committed judiciary'. In 1969, when she nationalized fourteen major banks, the paltry compensation was made payable in bonds that matured after ten years. This was struck down by the Supreme Court then, although it upheld the right of Parliament to nationalize banks and other industries. In 1970, when Indira abolished privy purses of the erstwhile royals, to many it was a constitutional betrayal of the solemn assurance given by Sardar Patel to the rulers during their integration with independent India. This ruling was similarly struck down by the Supreme Court. Ironically, the abolition of privy purses was challenged by the late Madhavrao Scindia, who later joined the Congress. In a nutshell, these amendments gave Parliament uncontrolled power to alter or abolish any fundamental rights. However, these drastic amendments were challenged by Kesavananda Bharati, the head of a math in Kerala, and owner of several coal and sugar companies. A majority of the thirteen Supreme Court judges held that Parliament cannot alter the 'basic structure' of the Indian Constitution. According to advocate Arvind P. Datar, if the apex court had not checked Indira's regime then, India would have degenerated into a totalitarian state or had a one-party rule.

Similarly, the UPA under Sonia kept drawing flak from the apex court. On the vexed issue of 'Coalgate' too, both public perception and opinion turned against the Manmohan regime. The scandal hit headlines when Comptroller and Auditor-General of India Vinod Rai presented a report pointing at a presumptive loss of Rs 1.86 lakh crores to the exchequer on the basis that the Union government had taken eight years to legislate and implement its own initial decision to

auction coal blocks. The matter went to the Supreme Court, where the court sought to examine two key issues: Should the licences and coal mine allocations that have been made be cancelled? Has the correct procedure been followed or have some people been favoured over others? Secondly, after deciding the issue of coal allocation, the court asked the Central Bureau of Investigation to go into the question of criminality in these allocations.

The opposition accused UPA-II of trying to shield the prime minister and those allegedly guilty of wrongdoings. A number of litigations were made and the Court, which was closely monitoring the CBI probe, lamented that the investigation agency was unable to act against powerful persons and announced it would like to attempt and insulate the CBI and make them free of such influences, describing the agency as a 'caged parrot'.

The prime minister was directly affected by 'Coalgate' as the coal ministry was headed by Manmohan from 2006 to 2009, when several allocations had been made. The question that came to everyone's mind was how much did the prime minister know? As minister in charge, did Manmohan take any steps to make the process more transparent? And more importantly, if he did not know of the dealings, who was responsible for the cover-up?

Union law minister Ashwani Kumar had to resign when it became public that some key officials of the coal ministry and the PMO were present in the meeting when the CBI prepared its response to be furnished before the SC. Worse, the CBI director himself admitted that changes were made in the CBI draft.

Manmohan reportedly sulked and dithered for days before Ashwani was asked to step down. In his view, the judiciary had no business to monitor the functioning of the executive and make sweeping 'oral observations' that lacked legal teeth. A battery of top lawyers, who are part of the Congress, urged Sonia to show scant regard for the judiciary and brazen it out. For many days, when Ashwani's future hung in balance, a Congress 'core committee' consisting of senior ministers and AICC functionaries met to clinch the issue. Finally, Sonia told Manmohan to seek Ashwani's resignation 'in the larger interest'. The prime minister reluctantly gave in.

According to noted constitutional expert Anil Divan, Ashwani's meeting with the CBI in the presence of coal ministry and PMO officials was not only wrong, but it was also in direct conflict of duty and oath to the Union of India. 'One of the duties of the minister is to find out the truth. Now, if he is representing the government as a minister as a guardian of public interest, then how can he interfere?' Divan told the website Rediff. Asked to comment on the argument that the law minister, technically speaking, had the right to talk to the CBI,

Divan said, ‘Not in this particular case, where the government is the accused’.

The row with the Supreme Court and Ashwani’s resignation saw another crisis related to the issue of moral turpitude and probity in public life. Union railways minister Pawan Kumar Bansal refused to step down after his nephew Vijay Singla was arrested for allegedly accepting a bribe to organize a plum posting for a senior Railways official. Bansal showed scant regard for public opinion, and once again Sonia had to step in to prevail upon the prime minister to sack him.

Between 2004 and 2009, the UPA, an alliance that had come into being hurriedly and under extraordinary circumstances, functioned well under Manmohan Singh. But UPA-II has seen the coalition facing innumerable challenges from within and without. In the larger context, the coalition has worked more like a bureaucratic machine than a political conglomerate. There were many lacklustre performances in some key portfolios, allies have sulked and left as per their regional calculations while ministers have frequently differed with each other, sidelining their juniors and caring little for accountability — a basic feature of parliamentary democracy.

On her part, Sonia constantly tried to intervene in the various crises, firefighting without disturbing protocol or hierarchy. As head of the National Advisory Council, Sonia was able to push through some subjects that were close to her. In fact, in UPA-I, the NAC served as a platform to build her legacy as a driver for policymaking. Many termed it as a ‘super cabinet’ as all big ideas came from it rather than from 24 Akbar Road. For many traditional Congressmen, it was disappointing that the NAC instead of the party showcased her as a political leader and her vision for the country. The absence of the Congress’s intellectual capability to influence government and bureaucracy was a clear departure from the past. In its first avatar, the NAC earned credit for pushing the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the Right to Information Act and other measures which were largely responsible for the UPA retaining power in 2009.

Some critics felt the NAC served as a vehicle to project Sonia as being above the hackneyed Congress party, the corrupt Indian political establishment and the prime minister. However many others found the NAC to be ‘refreshing’ as it sought to use the collective brains of socialists, non-government leaders with plenty of grass-roots experiences and left-of-centre activists as members to transform Sonia’s image from a political leader to a statesperson. The NAC mechanism showcased her as a vision for country, creating a ‘Sonia legacy’.

However, the NAC itself has not been free from in-house

squabbles. The right to food debate has seen a sharp division between the civil society members that Sonia had carefully chosen and those economists who believe in 'Manmohanomics'. While Aruna Roy, Harsh Mander, Farah Nadvi and others pushed to extend the food subsidy not only to the below the poverty line (BPL) families but to some segments above the poverty line, other members opposed it on the grounds that supplying 35 kg of grain per household will not be feasible without imports which they contended may erode the country's overall food security.

Union agriculture minister Sharad Pawar too disagreed with Sonia's ambitious food security plan. Pawar was opposed to some of the radical provisions of the draft food security bill and reportedly communicated to Manmohan Singh that, if passed, the proposed legislation would affect food procurement and send fiscal discipline haywire. The NCP chief's view was that universal entitlement of food security was not feasible, given the cost of grain subsidies. Moreover, he felt that it was neither necessary nor desirable to extend food subsidy to the billion-plus population. Pawar reportedly cited the Suresh Tendulkar Committee's observation that the number of BPL families totalled an estimated 37.2 per cent of the population.

Both Sonia and the NAC suffered a big setback when rights activist Harsh Mander, development economist Jean Dreze and Aruna Roy resigned from the NAC, holding the 'system' and the PMO responsible for not accepting the NAC's recommendations on minimum wage under the central government's rural jobs scheme. This was not the first time that NAC members had cried foul. Roy had been vocal in her criticism of the lack of income support for the elderly and the delay in passing the grievance redressal bill. However, many bureaucrats who served under Manmohan found her 'harsh and haughty'. She was often heard addressing the prime minister as 'Manmohan ji' instead of the established protocol of addressing him as 'Mr Prime Minister Sir' or 'Doctor Saheb', a glaring omission for someone who had been part of the Indian Administrative Service from 1968 to 1975, according to the babus. They also pointed at the fact that Roy drew salary, perks and other benefits as a NAC member under the PMO which, in technical terms, made Manmohan Singh her boss. Old timers recalled that many Congressmen who were senior than him in politics began addressing him as 'Mr Prime Minister Sir' when the good doctor became prime minister. For instance, Pranab Mukherjee, who as finance minister had appointed Singh as Reserve Bank of India governor, started addressing him as 'Mr Prime Minister Sir' from May 2004 till the former moved to the Rashtrapati Bhavan as President. On his part, Manmohan resumed addressing his former boss as 'Sir' when Pranab became President.

It was also said that the otherwise genial prime minister remained tense each time NAC members called on him without Sonia. The prime minister insisted upon the presence of some senior bureaucrats to say 'no' to measures that he found impractical to implement, instead of taking a lead himself.

In addition to the prime minister's own difficulties, Congress leaders remain wary and often dismissive about the NAC. A Union minister was once heard commenting, 'NAC members do not know how to balance the realities between their social aims and the country's finances.' But these Congress leaders failed to understand why Sonia had to rely on the NAC as the grand old party had failed to act as a political organization, providing what B.P. Sitaramayya had once described as 'life-sustaining doctrines pumped through the arteries of government".

Sonia Gandhi's brief bout with illness brought the spotlight on Rahul's sister Priyanka too. Sonia had left for the United States for medical treatment in mid-2011, and neither the name of the hospital nor the nature of her illness was officially confirmed. There were unconfirmed reports of her undergoing abdominal surgery at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Centre but well-informed sources believe that she had received treatment for a gynaecological problem, nothing more dreadful or serious (read cancer). When Sonia returned, she assigned Priyanka Vadra to look after her constituency of Rae Bareli following consultations with Rahul. Subsequently, Priyanka started holding a janata durbar at her residence every Wednesday to interact with voters from Rae Bareli. Priyanka was expected to help maintain Rae Bareli's status as a 'safe seat', particularly after the Congress was routed in the Amethi–Sultanpur–Rae Bareli belt in the 2012 Uttar Pradesh elections. The region holds significance for the Nehru–Gandhis, having sent Indira Gandhi, Rajiv, Sanjay, Sonia and Rahul to Parliament.

Party loyalists viewed the durbar as a sign of her greater involvement in politics, possibly entering into electoral fray ahead of the 2014 general election, although she ruled out any such move. Priyanka had once told NDTV journalist Barkha Dutt in an interview, 'Frankly, I'm not sure I've figured out why myself, but I'm very clear I don't want to be in politics. I'm very happy living my life the way I am. I think there are certain aspects of politics which I'm just not suited to.' Congress insiders, however, remain optimistic, citing how Priyanka is also on record that she would go to 'any extent' to help out Rahul.

Still away from politics, Priyanka chooses to honour the legacy of her father and grandmother, but not in the way Congress old-timers want her to. When the likes of Vasant Sathe and C.K. Jaffer Sharief

went public comparing her to Indira Gandhi and urging her to join politics, Priyanka paid a befitting tribute to Rajiv Gandhi's passion for wildlife and photography and Indira's love of the tiger by releasing a coffee table book called *Ranthambhore: The Tiger's Realm* (Sujan Art 2011), co-authored with friends Anjali and Jaisal Singh. Her writings have further expounded on this love for the wild. In an article titled *My Family and Other Animals*, she traces the roots of her bonds with Ranthambore, part of the Project Tiger campaign that her grandmother had conceived in the year of her birth, 1972. 'I first came here as a 13-year-old. Driving around the jungle with my parents in much the same way my children do with me, I was enchanted by it. I think it was my father's love for nature that spirited itself into my being,' Priyanka wrote about a 1985 trip. She, however, did not mention how the hard-working Rajiv was lambasted by the Opposition for taking his New Year holiday with family and friends, including Amitabh Bachchan, at the park.

It is said that the conqueror Taimur the 'Lame' once spoke to the famous historian and sociologist Ibn Khuldun about the fate of dynasties. Khuldun said that the glory of a dynasty seldom lasted beyond four generations. The first generation inclined towards conquest; the second towards administration; the third, freed of the necessity to conquer or administer, was left with the pleasurable task of spending the wealth of its ancestors on cultural pursuits. Consequently, by the fourth generation, a dynasty had usually spent its wealth as well as human energy. Hence, the downfall of each dynasty is embedded in the very process of its rise. According to Khuldun, it was a natural phenomenon and could not be avoided.

Set in the democratic world of our contemporary history, the rise and fall of the Nehru–Gandhi family suggests that Khuldun's prophecy has a ring of credibility. Jawaharlal Nehru was the architect, while Indira Gandhi expanded his achievements by emerging as one of the most powerful personalities of the twentieth century. Sanjay and later Rajiv Gandhi experimented a lot and paid heavily. Now the fourth generation, Rahul Gandhi, perhaps has good intentions of returning to the glory days of past, but things are not clicking at all.

It would be much to expect that Rahul would take a leaf out of his grandmother's book of life. In 1947, when communal troubles were at their peak, Indira Gandhi was spotted amid a bloodthirsty mob, rescuing a family that had given up hope. There was no security ring around her, but armed with extraordinary moral courage, she left the rioters stunned with her sharp tongue and pace.

Rahul Gandhi's silence over the ghastly rape and murder in Delhi in December 2012 and the rape of a five year old in April 2013 was most baffling. Like millions of his fellow countrymen, he may have

been too numbed by the brutality of the crimes and felt helpless. Perhaps, like many, he felt the futility of lighting candles and spending sleepless nights at India Gate and Jantar Mantar. But the youth icon missed a good opportunity to empathize with the young and old alike. Both 'Bharat' and 'India' were looking at him; he did not have to offer any instant solutions. All that was required was an admission of collective failure, of something going horribly wrong and of the need to change – in utter disregard of the line of thinking in North and South Blocks and among his own spin doctors. Similarly, when Union railways minister Bansal's nephew was caught by the CBI for allegedly accepting a bribe, Rahul kept mum even as Bansal dug his heels, trying to stay on as a minister.

During these crucial hours of crisis when an agitated nation looked on, he waited, believing things would settle down; in that wait, the moment was lost forever. It was far from what Indira had done in 1978, despite being out of power when the Belchi massacre occurred. She flew to Patna, motored into the countryside and then, because the monsoons had made the roads impassable, reached Belchi on elephant-back. It was late at night and she shone a torch on her face so that the villagers could recognize her. The next morning, a stark black and white picture of Indira Gandhi entering Belchi, alone but undaunted, frail but fearless, her strong profile silhouetted against the black night, was on all the front pages. It signalled her return to politics. It also proved something more important – that there was no one in Indian politics who could compete with her.

It requires common sense to comprehend situations. When reckless statements were made at alarming speed, someone like Rahul Gandhi needed to advocate change – be it in archaic laws, the police, the judiciary, the bureaucracy or in a mindset. He needed to say something close to what he loves saying, 'There is a need to change the *vyavastha* [system].' He could have asked for the removal of sex-offenders from the Congress, pressed for the passage of the women's reservation bill, for police reforms. More immediately, he could have used his influence within the UPA to remove the Delhi lieutenant-governor (who had already completed his term in April 2012), the police chief and perhaps the chief minister. He should have recalled how the Maharashtra chief minister and the Union home minister were asked to quit after the 26/11 attack. There was nothing specific against Vilasrao Deshmukh or Shivraj Patil, but their exit at that time had acted as a balm. The subsequent 2009 Lok Sabha polls, too, vindicated that the UPA's moral high ground had helped the Congress.

Rahul Gandhi's current task is more daunting than Rajiv Gandhi's in 1981–83. Today, under Sonia Gandhi's leadership, Rahul has many challenges and the clock is ticking fast towards the 2014 general

elections. Apart from reviving the Congress, an organization that is being controlled from the centre and has had its grassroots structure diminished considerably, Rahul has to act as an interface between party workers across the country, strike up a rapport with present and future UPA allies and justify every action the Manmohan Singh government takes under a grim economic situation and coalition compulsions. It is an open secret that as in the Indo-US nuclear deal, Rahul is backing the prime minister on pushing economic reforms. But his spin doctors do not want him to take any credit for opening doors to foreign direct investment in retail. Many AICC office-bearers feel that Rahul Gandhi's support for the rise in prices of diesel and LPG and his declared support for controversial measures like FDI in retail could prove costly. So while he has convinced his mother that the prime minister needs a free hand in this matter, his stamp has been missing. As a result, in the public eye, he is seen as a leader who is shying away from taking a firm stand on key economic issues pertaining to the lives and livelihoods of millions.

In the Congress's Jaipur Chintan Shivir, the party tried hard to pick up the threads. It coined a slogan, '*Pehle hoga nari samman, phir hoga bharat nirman*. [Without respecting women, India cannot prosper.]' Rahul Gandhi asked for the inclusion of gender-sensitive subjects in the school curricula, a hard line against Pakistan and tougher laws to deal with rape and crimes against women. But will these be enough for him to lead the party into the 2014 elections?

Nothing succeeds like success, Rahul's future depends on the party's success in winning the coming assembly polls in ten states, keeping workers' motivation levels high and bringing an element of moral value in every UPA–Congress action. He has to be perceived as active and visible, intermingling with both the Congress rank and file and the aam admi. If Rahul Gandhi wishes to prove Ibn Khuldun's prophecy wrong, he must deliver to the best of his abilities in the 2014 elections.

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